



Growing faith

General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma

Edited by Wilma McKee

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We must thank God at all times for you. It is right for us to do so, because your faith is growing so much and the love each of you has for the others is becoming greater (2 Thess. 1:3, Today's English Version).

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Preface

There has been interest in past years among some people in Oklahoma to write a history of the Oklahoma Convention. When the Oklahoma Convention celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1974 at Herold Mennonite Church, Cordell, this interest was stimulated. Individual churches have also regularly compiled fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversary histories. David A. Haury's *Prairie People* in 1981 caused people throughout the Western District Conference to ask if an Oklahoma history could be written.

John W. Voth, Convention president, arranged with David Haury to conduct a history workshop at the Oklahoma Retreat Grounds, Hydro, in the spring of 1984 with interested persons from Oklahoma invited. The workshop demonstrated methods of preserving church records and also touched on writing a complete Oklahoma Convention history and suggested that the Western District Conference Historical Committee might be willing to help with funding.

By convention time, October 1984, at First Mennonite Church, Clinton, the Convention executive committee under Voth's leadership was ready to nominate a history committee. They were: Robert Coon, now of Turpin; Dean Kroeker, Inola; Lawrence Hart, Clinton; Otto Nickel, Cordell; and Wilma McKee, Hydro, as chairperson. The convention approved the committee, authorized the writing of a Convention history, and added \$500 for the first year to their budget. They continued to give this amount for a total of three years, as did the Western District Conference Historical Committee.

The new committee met the first time on November 23, 1984, on the eve of the Oklahoma Relief Sale in Fairview. Members shared their own life experiences which made the recording of history vital to them. Some of the points stressed were: building unity, recognizing our unique diversity, understanding the purpose and meaning of

the Convention, portraying a realistic picture of the Convention and understanding the concerns of the people who started it. One member quoted Robert Kreider, North Newton, Kansas, as saying, "History is the record of the work of the Spirit."

Several decisions from the first meeting were to have Robert Coon serve as recording secretary, to eventually have a central file, to ask David Haury to meet with us as a resource, and to involve the churches by asking each church to appoint a history committee to work with us in compiling an individual church history. A questionnaire was started and a goal was formulated. Consensus of the committee stressed using a story approach, checking our sources, and presenting the whole story with honesty and sensitivity. Another decision was to present to the convention each year an overview of the Convention meetings held eighty years ago.

By the second meeting of the committee, members were ready to agree on assignments. A decision was made to have interview meetings with the church history committees with two members of the committee attending each interview meeting. Besides committee assignments for writing, David Haury was asked to write the introductory chapter and John W. Voth the final chapter on a vision for the Convention. Otto Nickel began translating the German minutes of the Convention into English, but later had to stop because of eye surgery.

As a committee we are indebted to many persons over the three years we have struggled to meet this challenge: the history committees of the churches are a vital part of this work; those persons willing to translate for us—Otto Nickel of our committee, Susie Thiessen, Hydro; Ernest Claassen, Whitewater, Kansas; Marie Janzen and Hilda Voth, Newton, Kansas. Many persons were interviewed by letter and telephone as well as in person and have enriched our work immeasurably. Ruby Krause, Hydro, typed many pages of the final work; Waldo and Ethel Kaufman, Liberal, Kansas, proof-read and assisted in various ways and Helen Coon, Turpin, helped with research and typing.

We are grateful especially to David Haury for his willingness to serve as a resource and for his sound advice and encouragement. Mennonite Library and Archives assisted us with materials and John and Barbara Thiesen with computer work. It has been a source of encouragement to be allowed to be a part of the Mennonite Historical Series of the Faith and Life Press and to rely on their expertise in publishing details. We are grateful to our families and friends who through these three years have remained supportive of our efforts.

Finally, we are indebted to the Oklahoma Convention and the Western District Conference for their financial support and for their

trust. We feel strongly as a committee that there was a purpose in the coming of the Mennonites to Oklahoma and our prayer is that this history, even allowing for its errors and incompleteness, will reveal that purpose.

Otto Nickel contributed to our understanding of the importance of history with this Scripture from Job 8:8-10 (NIV),

*Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned;
for we were born only yesterday and know nothing,
and our days on earth are but a shadow.
Will they not instruct you and tell you?
Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?*

WILMA McKEE

Goal of the Oklahoma Convention History Committee

To search out a realistic picture of the Oklahoma Convention in order to:

- understand the concerns of our early leaders;
- understand the purposes for the convergence of the churches into an organized body;
- understand the reasons which have caused us to function in unique ways in the past and present;
- build unity between the Oklahoma Convention churches and between the churches and the larger conference as we accept and praise our diversities.

1. Hard the road to Oklahoma

David Haury

Nearly two dozen Mennonite congregations in central Kansas celebrated their centennials during the past fifteen years. Mennonite immigrants, who came to Kansas from Europe and Russia, founded these churches. The first settlers came in 1874. Others followed through the 1880s and 1890s. They left their homes across the Atlantic to keep their faith and culture and to avoid military service. They sought economic gain and religious freedom in North America. Without exception, the original congregations which they founded in central Kansas have entered their second century.

Why did over fourteen thousand Mennonites and Hutterites move their communities to the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century?¹ Most of them chose Kansas as their new home, and yet the guarantee of nonresistance offered by Kansas was suspect. Yet, Kansas promised good soil and climate for farming. The promises of the Santa Fe Railroad persuaded many. The immigrants prospered, and their communities withstood the test of time. Most Mennonites who came to Kansas in the 1870s planted homes for many generations of their families. The United States proved to be a hospitable host, and the Kansas soil was as rich as the railroad agents had said.²

However, events unforeseen by the immigrants of the 1870s forced about half of their children out of central Kansas. Several thousand

1. David A. Haury, *Index to Mennonite Immigrants on United States Passenger Lists, 1872-1904* (North Newton: Mennonite Library and Archives, 1986).

2. For a detailed discussion of the Mennonite migration to Kansas, see David A. Haury, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981).

left around the turn of the century to seek a new promised land in western Kansas, Oklahoma, or other points west of Kansas. Although the centennial of this migration will soon be here, it will not be celebrated with festivals like those that marked the anniversary of the 1874 immigration.

Historians have just begun to explore the causes and meaning of the movement of Mennonites out of central Kansas. This book is the first thorough study of the General Conference Mennonites who settled in Oklahoma.

Why did hundreds of Mennonite families leave their communities in central Kansas only one generation after their arrival? Who were these migrants and where did they settle? What did this migration do to our faith and values?

A crisis of land and opportunity

Church membership records of the new Mennonite congregations begun in Oklahoma between 1895 and 1920 list those who left central Kansas. A quick look at this data gives us the number of people who migrated, why they left, and where they settled.³ Yet these facts obscure the intensely personal nature of this event. The decisions to leave central Kansas were painful and are not often noted in the records. Some examples will show the scope and complexity of the Mennonite migration to Oklahoma.⁴

Jacob Gaede was born on May 31, 1876, in Kuban, South Russia. Three years later, his parents settled near Hillsboro, Kansas. In 1900, he joined the Brudertal Mennonite Church, and two years later he married and began farming on his own near Hillsboro. In 1904, the Gaede family became part of a recently founded Mennonite community near Hooker, Oklahoma. Eight years later, they were back in Hillsboro, but only for four years. In 1916, they joined the Saron Mennonite Church near Fairview, Oklahoma. The Gaedes retired briefly to Reedley in 1944, but after two years they returned to Enid and eventually back to Fairview. Several moves later in life were somewhat unusual, but it was not uncommon for a young married couple to relocate a half dozen times or more.

The Cornelius Jantz family illustrates this phenomena. Cornelius

3. The Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA) has a dozen church record books from General Conference congregations in Oklahoma. It would be valuable, but time consuming, to analyze this data, perhaps using a computer, to determine the original Kansas congregation of each Oklahoma family and to correlate this information with their economic status, date of migration, and place of resettlement.

4. The following case studies are actual examples of immigration motives and patterns. However, the names have been changed to avoid embarrassment to the descendants of these families.

was a member of the Emmanuel Mennonite Church near Canton, Kansas. In 1900, he married and settled on eighty acres near Moundridge. The harvest was poor, and the family rented a different farm after one season. In 1907, they selected a small farm near Syracuse, Hamilton County, Kansas. A severe drought limited their stay to six months. Fifteen days in a covered wagon brought them to Meno, Oklahoma, a community composed largely of former Emmanuel members. Mrs. Jantz's brother found Cornelius a temporary position in a hardware store. In 1909, Cornelius returned his family to farming on his brother's land near Galva, Kansas. The family moved three more times around the Moundridge area during the next decade. But, unlike many other Mennonite families under these circumstances, they stayed in central Kansas.

Many Mennonites took part in the various runs opening Indian lands in Oklahoma in the mid-1890s. Sometimes a young man would stake out his claim and make some improvements before returning to central Kansas for his family. When harvests failed or were poor in Oklahoma, an industrious or desperate young farmer might also return to Kansas to help with the harvest, work in a store for part of the winter, or even join a railroad construction crew for a few months.

Some of the Mennonite migrants to Oklahoma had been born in the United States. Benjamin Brandt took his first breath in a boxcar near Topeka, Kansas, on September 23, 1874. His parents became members of the Alexanderwohl Church near Goessel, but Benjamin eventually settled in Idaho. His brothers and sisters scattered to three other sites: Gotebo, Oklahoma; Ewert, Washington; and Globe, Arizona. Only one brother stayed on the family farm near Goessel. Benjamin's children headed even further west, to live in Reedley, Upland, and San Jose, California.

Land in Kansas was in short supply

Why did thousands of Mennonites leave central Kansas beginning in the mid-1890s? The answer is simple—land in central Kansas was in short supply. Mennonite families often had seven or eight children.⁵ Only one child could inherit the family farm since farms could rarely be divided and remain viable. In fact, during the last quarter of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, the trend was toward combining smaller farms into larger holdings. Few were the farms that Mennonites could purchase from non-Mennonites in central Kansas at the end of the nineteenth century. Mennonite children

5. The examination of ship lists of immigrating Mennonites in the 1870s and the analysis of congregational records supports this conclusion. See *Index to Mennonite Immigrants*.

had only a few choices: work as hired laborers, obtain a farm outside central Kansas, or give up farming and move to a town or city. This last option did not become common until the second quarter of the twentieth century. Life as a hired laborer was not attractive in a society which had new frontiers and revered property ownership and independence.

Some statistics outline the pressure on land within Mennonite communities by the 1890s. In three McPherson County townships, Lone Tree, Spring Valley, and Superior, the Mennonites owned a majority of the land. Assuming that most people with so-called Mennonite names were still Mennonites, these townships had 268 Mennonite farms in 1903 and 177 non-Mennonite farms. By 1921, the number of Mennonite farms had grown to 345, an increase of 30 percent, and the non-Mennonite farms dropped to 141, a decline of 20 percent.

More detailed records are available for Harvey County.⁶ Halstead and Alta townships had 59 Mennonite and 177 non-Mennonite farms in 1882. In 1902, the number of Mennonite farms had more than doubled to 139, and the non-Mennonite farms fell to 107. This trend continued, and the 1918 records show 177 Mennonites and only 93 non-Mennonites. The expansion of the Mennonite communities was even greater than these numbers imply. In 1882, Mennonites owned 7,160 out of the 23,040 acres in Alta Township. In 1902, the Mennonite holdings had grown to 17,240 acres; and, in 1918, the total was 19,560 or 85 percent. Mennonites owned all of the northern half of the township. A person with a non-Mennonite name purchased only one farm from a person with a Mennonite name during this period. Excluding a couple of large non-Mennonite farms along the southern border of the township, Mennonites owned about 95 percent of the township. The Mennonite takeover was not quite so dramatic in Halstead township, growing from 5,680 acres in 1882 to 8,830 acres in 1918. This township is directly north of the town of Halstead, and many non-Mennonites had purchased farms here prior to the coming of the Mennonites to Kansas.

Most interesting is the average size of a Mennonite farm. In Alta, the average fell from 167 acres in 1882, to 163 acres in 1902, and to 153 in 1918. Mennonites bought out the non-Mennonites, but they were not merging their holdings into larger farms. In fact, most of the largest holdings, farms of several sections owned by Jacob Leisy,

6. Harvey County has plat books available for 1882, 1902, and 1918, and the number of acres of each farm is clearly listed. One limitation of this source is that a farmer owning property in several locations might be listed several times instead of as owner of the combined acreage.

Bernhard Warkentin, and Daniel Haury, were broken up shortly after the turn of the century. The average farm in Halstead township fell dramatically from 335 acres in 1882, to 261 acres in 1902, and to 180 acres in 1918.

Although the results of surveying other townships would not be as dramatic as those for Alta, by the turn of the century, Mennonites faced a land crisis throughout central Kansas. Mennonite communities had reached their limits, expanding in all directions until all land suitable for grain farming had been claimed. A dozen daughter colonies and/or congregations had grown out of the original twenty-two congregations. Some of the new congregations such as Tabor from Alexanderwohl and Inman and Buhler from Hoffnungsau were close to the mother church, but others like Lehigh and Durham were on the fringes of the original community. By the mid 1890s, most avenues of growth had closed in central Kansas, but new areas in western Kansas and Oklahoma were drawing many settlers as a new era of westward expansion began in the United States.

A crisis of community

Mennonites have traditionally been a mobile people, scattering across Europe in the face of religious persecution and economic restrictions. Less than a century before moving to Kansas, the ancestors of the Ukrainian Mennonites had migrated south from West Prussia into Russia. In the Ukraine, they built dozens of daughter colonies, some many miles from their Molotschna and Chortitza homelands. Community growth and migration, as a result of population pressure, were not unique to the Mennonite experience in central Kansas. Still, a close look at the nature of the migration from central Kansas reveals several unusual and perhaps disturbing features.

Mostly poorer and younger families left central Kansas. H. P. Peters, writing about Mennonite education, asked, "What business has the church to ask these scattered young people to support Mennonite institutions, when they were almost forced out of Mennonite communities?"⁷ The elders of Mennonite congregations and wealthier families rarely left. Often they would purchase smaller holdings from departing families.

The surviving records of eight new Mennonite congregations in Oklahoma reveal the ages of the migrants. Of the thirty charter members of the Sichar Mennonite Church near Cordell, 80 percent had been born in South Russia between 1860 and 1874. Thus, they

7. H. P. Peters, *History and Development of Education Among the Mennonites in Kansas* (Hillsboro: the author, 1925).

were between the ages of twenty-five and forty when joining Sichar in the late 1890s. Only three older couples were in their fifties. Children born between 1860 and 1880 were leaving Kansas shortly after their baptism and marriage.⁸

Moving out alienated and divided

The movement of Mennonites out of central Kansas in the 1890s was not a community endeavor. Alienation and divisions marked the migration. The Mennonite communities were atomized, and the contrast to the migration of the 1870s and 1880s from Europe and Russia is stark. While the details of the migration of Mennonites to Oklahoma are often hidden and deeply personal, the data clearly indicate a crisis challenging the faith and community identity of the Mennonites.

Between 1892 and 1940, forty-one congregations in Oklahoma, western Kansas, Colorado, and Texas joined the Western District Conference. Many of these new congregations were small, with less than thirty members; and leaderless, without an ordained elder. Records available for thirty-five of these congregations show a total charter membership of 1,726. Some individuals may have joined a congregation in the 1890s, and they then became part of another congregation a decade or two later. However, this total leaves out Mennonites who moved to Idaho, California, Montana, Washington, and Oregon. It also does not include those who did not join Mennonite congregations. One can safely estimate that over 3,000 Mennonite adults left central Kansas between 1890 and 1930. In 1910, the original twenty-two Kansas congregations had 3,437 members, and the dozen newer congregations in central Kansas added another 1,315 members remaining in or near the original communities.

Clearly more adult Mennonites left central Kansas between 1890 and 1930 than had arrived in the 1870s and 1880s. Perhaps as many left as stayed behind in central Kansas. The odds that a Mennonite child born in the 1860s or 1870s would remain in the Mennonite heartland were under 50 percent.

The Mennonite migration to Oklahoma and western Kansas began as a trickle in 1892 and became a flood by 1900. On April 19, 1892, five young Mennonites, Jacob S. Krehbiel, John Horsch, J. M. Pletscher, Henry A. Lehman, and Henry Schmutz, took part in the first Oklahoma run. They formed a small settlement, Garden Plains, in Blaine County, near several large Indian encampments. Krehbiel, a son of Christian Krehbiel, Halstead, intended to found an Indian

8. Church book, Sichar Mennonite Church, MLA, Bound Manuscript 102.

mission. Soon other Mennonites from Halstead joined the community; and in 1897 they formed the Salem Mennonite Church, which, in 1898, became the First Mennonite Church of Geary.

The first Mennonite congregation in Oklahoma also was related to Indian missions. A few families had settled in 1890 or 1891 near El Reno and near the General Conference mission station at Darlington. They became the Mennoville Mennonite Church in 1893. Fifteen Mennonite families from Alexanderwohl and Hoffnungsau Mennonite churches settled near the mission station at Shelly in Washita County. They became the Bergthal Mennonite Church on August 24, 1894. Many of these General Conference settlements were close to Mennonite Brethren groups, and the Mennonite Brethren movement from central Kansas parallels that of General Conference Mennonites.

The locations of the Mennonite congregations in Oklahoma ranged from the panhandle in the far west to the northeastern corner in Nowata and Rogers counties. The southernmost congregation was Greenfield, thirteen miles southeast of Carnegie. Mennonites had arrived in this area about 1900, although the congregation was not organized until 1914. During this period, two other congregations were formed in this region near Gotebo. Only the southeast quarter of Oklahoma did not boast a Mennonite congregation by 1910. This is not the place to survey the founding of all forty-one new congregations growing out of Mennonite migrations to Oklahoma, western Kansas, Texas, and Colorado. Many people moved back and forth between Kansas and Oklahoma around the turn of the century, and the choosing of places to settle was an interesting process.

In the early 1890s, local newspapers carried many advertisements offering land in various parts of Oklahoma. Land agents and railroads sought migrants. Mennonite publications contained the same ads. In 1904, *The Mennonite* carried a large ad for a Mennonite colony in the Quill Lake District of Saskatchewan. Forty townships were reserved for Mennonites, and land was six dollars per acre. In 1905, Rev. John Gerbrandt of Johannesthal Mennonite Church near Hillsboro led members of his congregation to Humboldt, Saskatchewan. On September 19, 1905, *The Mennonite* announced a visit to Syracuse, Kansas. On April 15, 1907, a large party visited the southwest, and toured a large tract of land in Texas as a possible nucleus of a new settlement. Throughout 1911, *The Mennonite* contained large ads from the Rock Island Railroad offering twenty million acres available for 175,000 farmers in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado. This publicity continued through the 1920s. In early 1927, two carloads of people left Hillsboro to inspect lands in New Mexico's Costilla Valley, about 125 miles south of Pueblo, Colorado.

Troubled by clannishness

These advertisements and inspection tours obscure the true nature of the Mennonite migration from central Kansas. Most families left one by one or in small groups as their economic conditions worsened. They moved to developing areas and formed small settlements along with many non-Mennonites. Mennonites rarely cooperated with each other. Reports show that clannishness was a problem.⁹ Only one of the original twenty-two Mennonite congregations in Kansas can truly be described as mixing Mennonites from different ethnic groups. First Mennonite Church, Hillsboro, begun in 1884 as a home mission project of the General Conference, was the exception. Other congregations contained mostly members from one group: Swiss, Swiss Volhynian, Swiss Galician, Swiss South German, Dutch Prussian, Dutch Volhynian, Dutch Polish, or Dutch Russian background Mennonites. Much research would be needed to find the ethnic background of the Oklahoma congregations, but it is clear that relatively little mixing of these groups occurred.

The small Mennonite settlements in Oklahoma and western Kansas also faced grim economic times. Crops often failed and droughts were severe. And the infamous years of the dust bowl and great depression soon overtook the struggling Mennonites. The Mennonites had not chosen ideal sites for planting their Turkey Red wheat. A series of crop failures, mortgage foreclosures, hungry children, or the need to beg for assistance from relatives in Kansas could destroy a family as well as a community. Like those immortalized in the famous *Grapes of Wrath*, not a few Mennonites sought salvation in California. This imagery allows one to flesh out the earlier stories of the Gaedes, Jantzes, Deckers, Brandts, and their hundreds of companions who left central Kansas for decades of poverty and hardships. Of course, many Mennonites in Oklahoma have persevered, and recent discoveries of gas and oil have made some wealthy. Yet the meaning of this migration for Mennonite values such as community and service should be explored in depth.

A crisis of faith

In 1910, the Western District Conference formed a colonization or resettlement committee to assist those leaving central Kansas. The movement had been going on for over fifteen years, but the committee endeavored to recommend suitable settlements to the still growing number of migrants. It tried to direct Mennonites into large

9. H. P. Peters discusses this situation in some detail and decries the inability of different ethnic groups of Mennonites to cooperate.

closed colonies. The committee even designed a plan to arrange and finance land purchases for poorer families and to collect funds for a church building within each settlement.

Was the new migration going to parallel the 1870s immigration? Six years later, the committee said: "Our people are too independent to pay attention to the judgment of the committee." The committee gave up in despair. The conference would not allow the committee to raise funds, and settlers ignored the colonies the committee recommended. Committee members complained that migrants followed ads in newspapers rather than their recommendations.

In 1917, the Colonization Committee contemplated its own death; and, in 1918, the Western District obliged. The final report concludes:

Ever since its birth, not exactly an excessive amount of vitality and energy has been at the disposal of the Committee for Settlements. Last year it even showed deadly germs. However, the Conference decreed that it should continue to live, in spite of the fact that it did not devote too much time to its report or receive it with too much interest. That such a condition of being half dead is unbearable for persons in whose blood vessels some vital energy is still coursing, hardly requires an explanation.¹⁰

The committee's effort to collect data regarding the Mennonite migration is its lasting legacy. It surveyed fifty-one congregations and twelve new settlements in 1914. Ninety-two families had moved during the previous year and twenty-one more were preparing to relocate. The committee listed the sites of these migrations: twenty-six to western Kansas, thirteen to Montana, twelve to Oklahoma, eleven to California, nine to Saskatchewan, seven to Idaho, and others to Washington, Colorado, Nebraska, and New Mexico.

The Colonization Committee was the only General Conference effort to orchestrate Mennonite colonies. But, in 1926, the Mennonite Settlers Aid Society worked to create closed settlements in Idaho and Washington. It had a short and controversial existence.¹¹ In 1929, the task of aiding the Harbin refugees interrupted the official work of the society, and the settlement of some of these refugees on society land generated part of the controversy. The major settlements were Elk, Deer Park, and Newport, near Spokane, Washington, and in Bonner County, Idaho. By 1930, around twenty families had moved west under the society's auspices. The charter of the society lapsed in 1935, and most of the settlements sponsored by the society soon disbanded.

10. The Western District minutes include annual reports from the Colonization Committee from 1910 to 1918.

11. The history of this organization has not been studied, but a major source of primary information is the collection of Henry P. Krehbiel, MLA 12.

The failed efforts of the Colonization Committee and Mennonite Settlers Aid Society support two conclusions. First, the Mennonite emphasis on the values of community had declined after the immigration to the United States. Younger Mennonites born in the 1860s and 1870s were more likely to leave their Mennonite communities without seeking another Mennonite settlement than their ancestors in Russia, Volhynia, or other parts of Europe had been. Ethnic and religious ties to the home community continued to exist, but social and economic life were not dependent on remaining in a homogeneous Mennonite community.

Losing the younger generation

Secondly, the leadership of the Mennonite communities did not recognize the loss of the younger generation until too late, and then reacted in a fragmented and inconsistent way. Few elders uprooted their families and headed another migration as they had in the 1870s. The leaders from that period were gone or elderly. Younger leaders were tied to Bethel College or other conference work in Kansas. Nineteenth-century Mennonite elders were not professionals



Why did so few Kansas pastors see migrating to Oklahoma as part of their spiritual duty? Elder Johann Ratzlaff (seated on chair) with the sewing society of the New Hopedale Church, Meno, around 1910.

hired from outside their congregations, but were usually wealthy and respected members. Johann Ratzlaff was among the few Kansas elders to relocate in Oklahoma, where he led the New Hopedale Mennonite Church at Meno. It is somewhat understandable why elders were reluctant to move, but why did so few of the assistant ministers, especially from large congregations with several pastors, see migration to Oklahoma as part of their spiritual duty?

Instead of ministers moving to Oklahoma, the Western District aided their scattered members by expanding a program of itinerant ministry, which had begun in the late 1870s. The *Reiseprediger* visited small and scattered groups of Mennonites, and in the 1890s this became the major activity of the Western District. Soon the itinerant ministers followed regular circuits for their travels in western Kansas and Oklahoma.

Success of itinerant ministry turned to failure

What did the itinerant ministers do to help the migrants? In 1908, Heinrich R. Voth, one of the most active ministers, preached eighty-one sermons and thirteen mission addresses, baptized fifty-nine individuals, served communion nine times, visited in over one hundred homes, performed one wedding, and ordained one minister, one deacon, and one elder. Voth was not alone. In 1911, twenty-three ministers assisted the Committee for Itinerant Preaching and contributed 561 days of labor. Expenses for travel rose from \$100 in 1892 to almost \$2000 in 1914. The locations visited by the itinerant ministers increased from about ten to over thirty. S. S. Preheim served as the last full-time itinerant minister from 1920 to 1922. During the 1920s, the Conference shifted its emphasis from supporting itinerant visits to providing full-time resident pastors for leaderless groups.¹²

Itinerant ministry was a tremendous success. Virtually all of the forty-one new congregations in western Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Texas were organized through the efforts of an itinerant minister. They brought spiritual leadership to hundreds of Mennonite families. Nevertheless, in the long run the efforts of the itinerant ministers failed. Twenty-eight of the forty-one congregations which they helped to plant are now extinct. Most of these small churches died slow and painful deaths. The problem did not rest with the program of the itinerant ministers. The communities were simply too small to sustain an active church program, support a minister, and, in many cases, even to survive as a village. The problems inherent in the nature of the migration could not be resolved by a program of visitation.

12. The annual reports of the itinerant ministers and Committee for Itinerant Preaching are included in the minutes of the Western District Conference.

Learning from the Oklahoma experience

What are the long-run implications of this migration of Mennonites out of central Kansas? First, the dispersion of the Mennonites in central Kansas was inevitable. The relation of family size, the number of acres necessary for a viable farm, and the amount of land available in central Kansas, made some type of migration essential. No one could expect every child of a Mennonite farmer in central Kansas to remain a part of the home community. One cannot attach any moral failure to the individuals who left central Kansas. Yet the fragmentation of the migration became so pervasive that it is clear that something was amiss.

Second, the root of the problem was the failure of the Mennonite communities in central Kansas to cooperate in forming large and planned colonies in the growing areas of the western United States. The eight Mennonite ethnic groups were beginning to work together in projects such as Bethel College, but they were not yet prepared to live together in the 1890s. The American doctrine of rugged individualism had deeply infiltrated the Mennonite value system. The nature of Mennonite acculturation deserves additional study. What happened to the expression of traditional values such as mutual aid, cooperation, and humility in the United States?

Third, the basic vitality and faithfulness of the Mennonite communities in central Kansas were threatened. In Pawnee Rock, the Swedenborgians and Pentecostals made inroads into the Bergthal Mennonite Church. The Missionary Church Association attracted Mennonite members near Elbing. The Mennonite Brethren established groups drawn from General Conference congregations in Goessel and east of Newton. Students from some congregations began to avoid Bethel College in favor of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Moody Bible Institute, or, by the 1920s, Tabor and Hesston colleges. All of these examples are different, but they exhibit a common theme. Everywhere, General Conference Mennonites were seeking a more evangelical and spiritual emphasis. Churches split or lost members to groups which stressed this aspect of faith. Many of the Mennonites who moved to Oklahoma or western Kansas adopted a more fundamental and evangelical faith and some even lost the traditional Mennonite emphasis on nonresistance. How is this factor related to the causes as well as nature of the migration from central Kansas?

Finally, during the past half century, another migration of central Kansas Mennonites has taken place. The younger members of many congregations have moved again, not to western Kansas or Oklahoma, but to urban areas. Poverty is no longer a characteristic of the migrants, especially as many have become upper middle class profes-

sionals. Yet this migration shares many characteristics with that of the 1890s and early twentieth century. The dispersion of the migrants is similar. Efforts to direct young Mennonites to a limited number of cities have largely failed, and the planting of urban Mennonite fellowships has been difficult. Leaders and conferences have reacted more positively to the migration to the city although the response was still delayed by several decades in many cases. It is hard to believe that in the 1930s Mennonite leaders were proclaiming that urban Mennonites were automatically lost to the faith. Only time will tell if the urban churches will have greater stability and longevity than the congregations which the itinerant ministers visited a few generations earlier. The initial results are mixed, but today far more members of the Western District Conference belong to newer urban congregations than to the surviving congregations begun during the 1890 to 1930 period.

What lessons can be learned from the migration of Mennonites to Oklahoma? This was not a migration to escape persecution and preserve the faith. Thus we do not celebrate the migration as a movement; and, in fact, it may serve as a reminder of failure and embarrassment for the church. Families suffered, communities were torn apart, leadership failed, and values were challenged. Yet many young Mennonites from central Kansas preserved their faith and passed it on to new generations. A number of Mennonite communities in Oklahoma will celebrate centennials during the next decade. They have survived the hardships and challenges. This volume is a celebration of their faithfulness and of the Oklahoma Convention which binds them together in community and service.

2. Arapaho and Cheyenne meet the Mennonites

Lawrence H. Hart

Long, long ago our people lived in a land far to the north. In winter it was very cold, and for shelter we built small round lodges out of poles and covered them with grasses and earth. We didn't live badly, but sometimes it was hard to find enough to eat.

In the summer food was more plentiful and we could come together in larger camps. We built willow nets and caught fish in the nearby lakes. Our men hunted small game to eat, and our women gathered the many wild fruits and vegetables. We didn't live badly, but it wasn't like it was living on the plains.¹

Such is the oral tradition of the Cheyenne from a time about 1600 when they lived in what is now the northeastern part of Minnesota in a large area between the Mississippi and upper Red rivers. Here they lived for many years.²

Likely, their first contacts with non-Indian peoples were French explorers and traders. The Cheyenne, at this time, were unlike the Cheyenne of the plains. They were a peaceful village people, farming the land. They ate corn, squash, and herbaceous plants, small wild game, and fish.³

A major change in their way of life came with the coming of the horse. With the horse, they were able to travel great distances. They

1. Steve Linscheid, "You Can Walk in Our Moccasins," a description of OUT-Spokin' bike hike tracing the route of Cheyenne migration, *With*, (March 1980), Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 15-19.

2. James B. Mooney, *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* (Lancaster, Pa: New Era Printing Co., 1907).

3. Mooney.

began to plant their crops in the spring and then spend the summer months hunting on the plains for large game, such as the buffalo. After successful hunts which assured food for the winter months, they would return to their villages and harvest their crops.⁴

Life continued almost unchanged until the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 which provided for an orderly expansion of the frontier. But it had a domino effect in displacing or uprooting tribal groups. The tribes to the east and south were pushed off their lands. They in turn pressured those to their west, north, or south.

*Pretty soon, though, we started getting attacked by other tribes coming from the east. They wanted our food, furs, and horses, and had many more guns than we did. We tried to defend our villages, but finally groups of our people started moving out onto the plains, staying there year-round. As the plains became our home, the buffalo became our brother, giving us food, clothing and shelter that we needed for this new life. We started living in tepees, moving from place to place, carrying our camp and supplies with us. It was a good way to live.*⁵

The plains life of the Cheyenne is best known by most people. The Cheyenne call themselves *Tsistsistas*, which means "our people." They had a strong peoplehood feeling. They were a part of the Algonquin group generally found in the northeastern part of the continent.

The change from being a peaceful, farming village people to a people of the plains, migrating with the great buffalo herds, brought a great change. Anthropologist James B. Mooney best sums up this change when he says that the Cheyenne changed so completely that the former life is remembered only in sacred tradition. It would be impossible to believe, but for the documented proof of their former life.⁶

In 1804, Lewis and Clark found the Cheyenne in the Black Hills country of present South Dakota. Some did continue to practice horticulture. The skilled farmers developed hearty crops. But by and large, a greater number completely abandoned village life. The men developed warrior societies and became great equestrians.⁷

In 1825, the United States made a treaty with the Cheyenne. The treaty, which admitted the supremacy of the United States, was approved at the mouth of the Teton River.⁸

4. Lawrence H. Hart, "Appaloosas Among the Cheyenne," *Appaloosa News*, (April 1984), p. 72.

5. Linscheid.

6. Mooney.

7. Hart.

8. Donald J. Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyenne* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 22.

Southern Cheyenne come to Colorado

The decade of the 1830s found the Cheyenne breaking into two groups. One group wanted to move south, paralleling the Rocky Mountains while the other group chose to remain in the Powder River country which they now considered their home. The split was not abrupt, but gradual. The group that moved south eventually settled in what is now the southeastern portion of the state of Colorado. They lived along the Purgatoire River and traded at Bent's Fort located along the Arkansas River. They developed a close relationship with William Bent, a well-know trader.⁹

In 1849, the influx of white settlers brought tensions between the Indian tribes and the immigrants and gold seekers. Skirmishes became frequent. In 1850, the United States sent peace commissioners to make a treaty with the plains Indians. The largest gathering of these tribes, some traditional enemies, took place near Fort Laramie, at a place called Horse Creek. There the Arapaho and the Cheyenne signed a peace treaty. The Arapaho and Cheyenne were allies. The area along the Wind River was the home of the Arapaho, also an Algonquin tribe. They, too, over a period of time, split into two groups. The Arapaho, now known as the Southern Arapaho, moved with the main body of Cheyenne while the other group chose to remain on their land along the Wind River. In the treaties made by the Cheyenne and the Arapaho, the Arapaho are listed first. In later times, such as one of the Medicine Lodge treaties, the Cheyenne are mentioned first and this is how they are known today.

Earlier, in 1840, the Cheyenne made a peace treaty with the Kiowa and it took place along the Purgatoire River. Gift exchanges between the two tribes were made to seal the treaty. Hundreds of horses were given to the Cheyenne by the Kiowa and many goods were given to the Kiowa by the Cheyenne.¹⁰

The societal organization of the Cheyenne consisted of male societies. At the apex was a Council of Forty Four Chiefs, known as peace chiefs. The male societies were warrior societies whose major task became, in the decades of the 1850s, '60s, and '70s, protection of the tribes. The best known of the warrior societies was the Dog Soldiers. They developed a reputation second to none on the high plains. They were excellent equestrians and their highest honor was to count coup on an enemy in the thick of battle and live to tell about it. There were only two tribal groups among all the plains Indians who practiced counting coup. To simply touch the enemy and not kill was the highest honor.¹¹

9. Berthrong, p. 102.

10. Hart.

11. Hart.

At Sand Creek, the most atrocious act

The Cheyenne peace chiefs sought to make peace and friendship with non-Indians such as government officials as well as the military. The range of the Cheyenne and Arapaho hunting and trading was extensive. Mennonite archaeologist Waldo Wedel says that the Cheyenne and Arapaho were the principal tribes between the Arkansas and the Platte rivers.¹² This is a vast area and it became a source of conflict with settlers, immigrants traveling through Cheyenne and Arapaho country, and government and military officials.

In 1864, Kansas was admitted to the Union. Colorado was seeking statehood. Encounters between the warrior societies of both Arapaho and Cheyenne and the whites grew more intense and violent. During this period, the peace chiefs worked hard to make peace. In September 1864, a delegation of peace chiefs traveled to Camp Weld, near Denver, to make peace. They met with Territorial Governor Evans and his commanding officer of the Colorado Militia, Colonel John Chivington. Both Evans and Chivington had political ambitions. They had gained popularity with citizens by organizing a militia to fight the Indians. Their assurances of peace made to the Cheyenne and Arapaho were deceptive. They talked about making war immediately prior to and following the peace talks at Camp Weld. Talk was even made of what to do with Indian children. A decision was made that children would be fair game. "Nits make lice" was Chivington's rationale.¹³

The Cheyenne who were friendly were asked to move northeast of Fort Lyon, to an area along the Sand Creek. This they did. On the morning of November 29, 1884, the most atrocious act ever committed in the United States took place. A deliberate attack was made upon the peaceful village of Black Kettle, a peace chief and leading proponent of living at peace with the white man.¹⁴

When our people saw and heard the troops coming they were confused. They were not at war with the whites, and the chiefs had been told that they would be safe there on Sand Creek.

There is a ridge which follows the creek bed at this place—up above where the people were camped. They could hear them coming, but could not see them and did not know what was happening. As the troops came up over the ridge and the guns opened fire, Black Kettle raised the American flag. They had told him that if he did this, his people would not be attacked. But it did not make any difference. They

12. Waldo R. Wedel, *Prehistoric Man on the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961).

13. Berthrong, p. 220.

14. Berthrong, p. 217.

rode into the camp shooting everything in sight and killing our people—men, women, and little children. Finally, Black Kettle fled.

But White Antelope, he didn't flee. He had told the whites he would live in peace with them, and he wasn't going to fight or run. He just stood there, in front of his tepee, and sang his death song, like this:

Father, have pity on me, Father, have pity on me,
The old men say, only the earth endures.
You have spoken truly, you have spoken well.
Nothing lives long, only the earth and the mountains.
Nothing lives long.
Only the earth and the mountains.¹⁵

White Antelope was one of the first to be shot down. This peace chief offered no resistance for he had smoked a pipe to live at peace.

The Sand Creek massacre outraged many people, especially in the east. A congressional investigation followed. The best record can be found in Helen Hunt Jackson's book *A Century of Dishonor*.

In response to the many actions of the military against the Indian tribes, some church groups voiced concern. Most notably were the Quakers (Society of Friends), one of the historic peace churches. They called for a peace policy in dealing with the Indian tribes. Early in President Grant's administration, this peace policy was instituted. This call for action, based on peace, was to involve a commitment from the Quakers. They would be open to appointment as agents of reservations and thus be in a position to deal directly with Indian tribal groups in carrying out this peace policy.

Prior to the Sand Creek massacre and definitely following that tragedy, the Cheyenne peace chiefs were in disfavor with their own tribe, especially with the warrior societies. Other tribes were also outraged and among them the Sioux, a vast nation of Indians long allied with the Cheyenne.¹⁶

Black Kettle and other peace chiefs still sought peace. They, too, had smoked a pipe and were committed to live at peace no matter what the cost. The ethic of a peace chief is best summed up in an ancient saying passed down as oral tradition:

*If you see your mother, wife or children being molested or harmed by anyone, do not take revenge. Take your pipe and go sit and smoke and do nothing, for you are a Chief.*¹⁷

It was a norm for peace chiefs to live a life of peace. Another saying

15. Linscheid.

16. Martha Wenger, *Black Kettle: His Way of Peace*. Humanities and Peace Studies, Bethel College, 1975, p. 16.

17. *The Cheyenne Way of Peace*, unpublished manuscript developed by the Cheyenne Peace Project, Cheyenne Cultural Center, Clinton, Oklahoma, 1987, p. 99.

is, “Even if your very own son is killed in front of you, you are to do nothing.”¹⁸

Treaties leading to Oklahoma and the Mennonites

Peace commissioners were again sent out by Washington to make peace with the tribes on the plains. Another treaty was made in 1865, known as the Little Arkansas Treaty, and the Cheyenne and Arapaho were given another reservation. Black Kettle and other peace chiefs signed the treaty for the Cheyenne and Arapaho chief Little Raven signed it for the Arapaho.¹⁹

About this time, another event which was to affect the Cheyenne and Arapaho in later years began to take shape. People from another historic peace church tradition were organizing. They were to become the General Conference of Mennonites of North America. As the Conference grew, one of their first concerns was for Mennonite immigrants coming to the United States. Schools and churches were built for them.²⁰ Eventually, the new General Conference pursued another interest: mission work.

The final treaty between the Cheyenne and Arapaho with the United States was worked out at Medicine Lodge Creek, Kansas, in the late summer and fall of 1867. By terms of the treaty signed by Black Kettle and others for the Cheyenne and by Little Raven and others for the Arapaho, a reservation was created for them in what is now the north central part of Oklahoma.

When the two tribes moved to the reservation area as defined in the Medicine Lodge Treaty, they did not like the area. The tribes moved further south and west and preferred that area. Rather than forcibly moving them to the defined reservation area, President Grant acceded to their wishes. By executive order, the boundaries of the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation were created in an area which the two tribes preferred. This peace policy action was but a first. A second such action was the appointment of Brinton Darlington, a Quaker, as the first reservation agent on the newly established Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation.²¹

Over the years, the Cheyenne and the Arapaho had signed several treaties with the United States. This assured them legal sovereignty. In legal terms, they were seen as sovereign nations. This has implications now and in the future.

18. *The Cheyenne Way of Peace*, p. 99.

19. Wenger, p. 17.

20. David A. Haury, *Prairie People* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981), p. 24.

21. Donald J. Berthrong, *The Cheyenne-Arapaho Ordeal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976).



The Cheyenne and Arapaho as Algonquin people were once highly organized: *Arapaho camp south of Darlington in Indian Territory.*

The peace tradition among the tribes

The Cheyenne and Arapaho as Algonquin peoples were once highly organized. The Cheyenne had developed a system of jurisprudence unequalled by many tribes.²² It involved the peace chiefs as keepers of peace, intratribally. Offenses committed intratribally were dealt with according to this system. Significantly, for the most heinous crime, taking the life of another Cheyenne, the punishment is expulsion from the tribe. There was no capital punishment.

Though the popular literature indicates that the tribes were ruthless, a late Mennonite historian has noted, by the most extensive documentation, that not as many settlers and immigrants were killed by Indians as purported. The late John D. Unruh, Jr., in *The Plains Across* dispels the myth that vast numbers of whites were killed by Indians on the overland trail from 1849 to 1860. The Indians were more often helpful assistants to those engaged in the overland travel.

22. Karl N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941).

Continued harassment from the military was hard on the tribes. It seemed that the greater the exploits of the Dog Soldiers, the greater the suffering. Military officers were bent on making great careers or had political ambitions. An engagement with the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers—or any of the other societies of the Cheyenne and Arapaho—was certain to bring rewards to the ambitious. For this the tribes suffered greatly.

By the beginning of the reservation period in 1868, the people were cut down in numbers from stress of movement from one reservation to another, from the violence of soldiers, and from disease, hunger, and starvation. Once a people of high character with a great human dignity, they had been degraded to a state of “physical, moral, and spiritual misery.” To such a people came the first General Conference Mennonite missionary, Samuel S. Haury.

Beginnings on the first mission field

The mission work among the Arapaho began in 1880. In 1875, Samuel S. Haury had been appointed to investigate possible mission fields for the newly created General Conference.²³

In the summer of 1876, Cheyenne spirits had been uplifted by the Battle at the Little Big Horn. General George Custer had been killed by an alliance of Sioux and Cheyenne. At that battle, the Cheyenne fired the first volley. That fall, the General Conference’s first ordained missionary visited the Osage, Pawnee, as well as the Sac and Fox tribes in Indian Territory. The following year he came among the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. Chief Powder Face of the Arapaho lodged him for two months in a tent loaned to him. By this time, Brinton Darlington was dead. He had died in 1872 and the Indian people mourned deeply the loss of this Quaker. He had gained deep respect and the agency was thus named after him.

Another Quaker, not as well respected as Darlington, came to be the agent. John D. Miles was visited by S. S. Haury and the Mennonites were invited to begin work among the Cheyenne and Arapaho. A decision was made by Haury to begin work among the Arapahos first. He wrote to the Mission Board:

Next spring, perhaps in April, God willing, I shall again return to the Indians, there to settle among the Arapahos. First . . . erect a small building . . . then endeavor by the Lord’s aid to learn the language. . . . My reasons for selecting the Arapahos are these: more preliminary work has been done among the Arapahos; They seem to be more willing to receive a missionary than the Cheyennes. The Indian agent

23. Lois Barrett, *The Vision and the Reality* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1983), p. 17.

*there also has advised me to begin my work with the Arapahos. But above all I feel myself drawn to this tribe. . . .*²⁴

The General Conference Mennonite Mission Board approved this plan and the work began.

Samuel Haury and his wife Susie arrived in late May of 1880 and began actual work on May 29. Sunday school and weekday Bible classes for the children were begun. On Sunday afternoons, services were held for the adults.

By August 1881, a frame mission school building was completed and accommodated twenty-five Indian children in addition to the missionary family. That fall a mission school opened. At first, the total enrollment was only seven boys but the number increased.

On February 19, 1882, a fire broke out which destroyed the mission building. Lost in the fire were three orphaned Indian children, for whom the Haurys had been caring, as well as their own infant son. The Board responded to this tragedy by sending Christian Krehbiel and Heinrich Richert to bring comfort and hope for the Haurys who were willing to continue work. A new three-story structure of brick was completed by Christmas of 1882. It accommodated twice as many students as the older structure that had been destroyed by fire.²⁵

Buildings and money found at Cantonment

In June of that year, word came that the military post at Cantonment was being abandoned. The location of Cantonment was sixty-five miles northwest of Darlington. The buildings were offered to the General Conference for missionary work. But funds were low and the Mission Board hesitated to accept the new work. Agent Miles at Darlington requisitioned government money for the work at Darlington mission. An amount of \$5000 was appropriated and the building would be owned by the government but used for mission work. When no longer used for mission work, the building at Darlington would be returned to the government. This arrangement freed funds for the Board to open work at Cantonment. The Haurys moved to Cantonment to begin work and H. R. Voth took charge of Darlington.²⁶

Voth had been educated at Wadsworth, Ohio, seminary as had S. S. Haury. In 1882, he joined the mission as a teacher. In the spring of

24. Edmund G. Kaufman, "Mennonite Missions Among the Oklahoma Indians," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (Spring 1962).

25. Marvin Elroy Kroeker, "The Mennonites of Oklahoma to 1907." Unpublished thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1954, pp. 17, 18.

26. Christian Krehbiel memoirs, translated by Elva Krehbiel Leisy, "The Beginnings of Missions in Oklahoma," *Mennonite Life* (July 1955), p. 111.



By 1900, more than one hundred Mennonites had served on the first mission field as either teachers, evangelists, farmers, matrons, laundresses, cooks, or seamstresses: *mission school at Cantonment, 1890-1891.*

1883, Haury took charge of the work at Cantonment and Voth was made superintendent of the Darlington mission. As the work developed at both Darlington and Cantonment, many workers joined in the effort.

Through the years of education work, notable Mennonite educators worked in this first field for the General Conference. The first president of Bethel College, C. H. Wedel, served at Darlington. H. H. Ewert, founder and principal of Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba, served among the Cheyenne and Arapaho as well as S. K. Mosiman, who became the president of Bluffton College. By 1900, more than one hundred Mennonites had served on the first mission field as either teachers, evangelists, farmers, matrons, laundresses, cooks, and seamstresses. Deaconesses from Newton also became involved by serving as midwives to the missionary and other workers' wives and assisted in delivery of their infants.²⁷

27. James C. Juhnke, "General Conference Mennonite Missions to the American Indians in the Late Nineteenth Century." Paper presented to the Conference on the Mennonite Experience in America (II), October 8, 1977.

Morning Star people flee to Montana

One cannot imagine the difficulty experienced by these workers and those to whom they were sent to minister. The reservation period was difficult. For the Indians, there were epidemics. The weather and climate was not what most of them had experienced in the Bent's



The two northern chiefs wanted to move their people back north where game was plentiful, there were no diseases, and the weather was to their liking: *Chiefs Little Wolf and Dull Knife, 1877.*

Fort area. In fact, it was the weather and an epidemic that caused the final break between the Northern Cheyenne and the main body of Cheyenne. The smaller group remaining in the Powder River country had not been participants to the various treaties. Thus when they were found in that country, they were forced to move to the reservation in Indian Territory. They reluctantly came to join their southern people. They were under the leadership of chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf. They suffered much from the climate change and an epidemic of malaria took a great toll. The two northern chiefs wanted to move their people back north where game was plentiful, there were no diseases, and the weather was to their liking. Refused by both the agent and the military, as well as the president and the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, they simply left.

They fled north and it was no secret where they were going. In almost immediate response, the military wired Washington and word was received that this band of Cheyenne, numbering 353 people—92 men, 120 women, 69 boys, and 72 girls—were to be captured and returned to the reservation. Eventually, as reported best by Ted Risingsun, a respected Mennonite church leader among the Northern Cheyenne, over 10,000 U.S. troops responded and sought to capture this small band of Cheyenne. In fact, the response of General Sheridan was more severe. He ordered General Crook “to spare no measures . . . to kill or capture the band of Cheyennes on the way north.” This flight became an intriguing story for the eastern press. Oddly enough, many easterners took an interest in the suffering Cheyenne fleeing back to their country. Eventually, through an executive order, a reservation in Montana was established for them. And in time, this also became a mission field of the General Conference Mennonite Church. The Morning Star people, named after Dull Knife, have kept this remarkable story alive in their oral tradition.

At Cantonment, in 1884, John J. Kliever arrived to be a teacher. He served until 1886 when Haury resigned. To the Indians, Haury had been a father and an interpreter. J. J. Kliever was made superintendent of the Cantonment Station and H. R. Voth became the principal of the missions in the Territory. More buildings at Cantonment were erected. A building at Cantonment, which had been planned by Haury, was completed during Kliever’s administration by A. T. Kruse, Sr., Halstead, Kansas. The building had a basement and was three stories high. Dormitories in the upper stories could hold seventy students and there were also two large schoolrooms and quarters for school personnel.

In 1884, four Indians were placed in the Mennonite school at Halstead. Others were sent to Kansas to work during the summer months in the wheat harvest. These efforts led to the establishment

of another school for Indians at the Christian Krehbiel farm near Halstead. Up to thirty Indian young people were taken for ten-month terms. In 1896, the school was closed when the government withdrew a subsidy of \$125 per child.

These educational efforts netted for the Cheyenne and Arapaho basic skills in reading and writing. Some even learned the German language and wrote home in German. Their folks could not read English in all probability, much less German!²⁸

The year 1886 saw a number of Indian deaths due to tuberculosis. Many of these made deathbed confessions and were given Christian burials.

In 1889, J. J. Kliever started a new station at Shelly on the Washita River. J. S. Krehbiel began work at Red Hills in 1892. H. R. Voth left the first field and began work among the Hopi Indians in Arizona in 1893.



The year 1888 saw the first baptism of the many years of endeavor: *Maggie Leonard, about seventeen years of age.*

28. Juhnke, p. 13.

No congregation for the first convert

The year 1888 saw the first baptism of the many years of endeavor.²⁹ It took place at Darlington on June 3, 1888, and was observed by Mission Board members. Maggie Leonard, about seventeen years of age, was baptized by Andrew B. Shelly, president of the General Conference Mennonite Church. Mission Board members came for this service from as far as Pennsylvania and Iowa in addition to Kansas. Another young Arapaho girl, Susie Rowlodge, also had hoped to be baptized but she was on her deathbed from tuberculosis on that very day. Though Maggie Leonard had no congregation to join, as customary for Mennonites, she represented the firstfruits of eight years of difficult labor. The first organized church for Maggie Leonard to join was formed in 1897.

Maggie Leonard eventually left the Mennonite church but her conversion and baptism is significant. The Arapaho and the Cheyenne faced many problems and to become a Christian was not an easy decision to make. The most significant aspect of what occurred on June 3, 1888, is that this was the first convert of Mennonite mission work. Since then there have been many Maggie Leonards among the Arapaho and Cheyenne, the Hopi and Northern Chey-



His first major effort after coming to Cantonment in 1892 was to learn the language of the Cheyenne people: Rodolphe Petter with second wife Bertha Kinsinger.

29. Juhnke, p. 18.

enne, and, indeed, true to Christ's commission, throughout all the whole world!

In 1892, Rodolphe and Marie Petter came from Switzerland to do mission work at Cantonment.³⁰ Petter was of the Reformed Church and had studied at the Basel Mission Institute. His first major effort was to learn the language of these people and he chose the Cheyenne language. The achievement of his fifty-five-year career as a missionary was the written Cheyenne, which he developed.³¹ He translated the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament into Cheyenne. He also translated *Pilgrim's Progress* into Cheyenne.

Most of the missionaries and teachers viewed the Indian ways as heathen. Some became fascinated with these cultures and among these were D. S. Hirschler, brother of Susie Hirschler Haury. A graduate of the Wadsworth seminary, he came to the mission field as a medical missionary. His interest netted unprecedented rapport with the Cheyenne. He died on September 6, 1890, and was buried in the Cantonment cemetery.

Another missionary fascinated with Indian culture was H. R. Voth. He gathered artifacts, and when he went to work among the Hopi, he was remarkably successful in gaining such confidence among them that he was allowed to view ceremonies unseen by whites. He took copious notes of everything he saw. His notes, as well as an extensive collection of Hopi artifacts, are now at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. This caused consternation among Mission Board members. Voth left the mission field to serve a typical Mennonite rural pastorate.³²

By the latter part of the 1880s, most of the continent was settled. Land was no longer available for settlement. The Indian reservations began to look attractive to a land-hungry people. With the governmental policies aimed at "civilizing" the Indian and the church at work to "Christianize," coupled with a lack of land to settle, Congress was approached by Eastern philanthropists and reformers and by Western senators and congressmen to settle this problem. It was easy to see that if individual Indians were allotted plots of land, there would be a large surplus of land.

In 1886-87 came the Indian Allotment Act, or the General Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Act, after a senator from Ohio.³³

30. Kroeker.

31. Herbert M. Dalke, "Seventy-five Years of Missions in Oklahoma," *Mennonite Life*, (July 1955), p. 103.

32. Barrett, pp. 40-43.

33. Connie L. Hart, "Mennonite Missions Among the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians of Oklahoma." Seminar paper, Department of History, Bethel College, March 1980, p. 2.

Passed in 1887, the act gave power to the president to make reservation Indians landowners if he chose to do so. The Jerome Commission, empowered by the president to secure an agreement to implement the act, made a visit to the Cheyenne-Arapaho. Though never signed by the Cheyenne chiefs, an agreement was secured which led to the opening of Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation on April 18, 1892. Every Indian received an allotment of 160 acres of land. Well over four million acres of the reservation was unclaimed and declared surplus. It was opened for settlement. Local oral tradition among the Mennonites was that this land was advertised in Russia and some migrated to this country for the sole purpose of settling on the Cheyenne-Arapaho country.

Mennonite bond in Red Wheat's name

When the reservation was surveyed, interpreters were used by the government in order to properly record names of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people on their allotment. Up to this time, many had only Cheyenne or Arapaho names, especially among the older people who had not attended any schools. Some of the interpreters were Mennonites. In what became Custer County, an older Indian woman's Cheyenne name was difficult to translate. She became an allottee. The name recorded on the document is Red Wheat. This is not a name used by Cheyenne but is from another culture, that of the Mennonites! Allotment 79, in Section 18, Township 12 North, Range 16 West, is known as the Red Wheat Allotment. This shows the close bond between the Indian people and the Mennonites.

A further testimony to the close bond is that Red Wheat became a Christian when M. M. Horsch opened the Clinton (Haoenaom) mission station. It was established in 1894, according to the Cheyenne.³⁴ Red Wheat deeded twenty acres of her "Red Wheat Allotment #79" to the Mennonite Board of Missions for establishment of a station.

Expanding the mission and the church

The work at Darlington was abandoned in 1902, just five years before Oklahoma statehood. M. M. Horsch came to the Washita and established a mission in 1894 and a mission station was built on the twenty-acre tract deeded to the Mission Board by Red Wheat. Other missionaries who came to the field were G. A. Linscheid and J. H. Epp.

The Washita mission, known as Shelly, functioned until 1897. That area was rich for farming and many of the 160 acre tracts were

34. Connie L. Hart, p. 2.

settled by Mennonites, both of the General Conference and the Mennonite Brethren. The Shelly station discontinued when Missionary Kliewer became a pastor of one of the local Mennonite churches.

The Red Hills mission continued to operate under J. S. Krehbiel until after the land run in April of 1892. When a church was established in Geary, Krehbiel accepted a call and became the pastor. This Indian mission was discontinued in 1897.

That same year a church for the Arapaho people was begun two miles south of Canton.

In 1898, the Red Moon mission, later known as Hammon, was built on an eighty-acre tract of land. Red Moon was a Cheyenne chief who welcomed Missionary Henry J. Kliewer to minister to his people, which included Chief White Shield and Chief Howling Water.³⁵ These chiefs had led their bands to claim their allotments as far removed from the agency as possible. They did not want them to become dependent upon the rations handed out, even though these rations of beef and other commodities were the result of certain treaty articles and were due the people.

The Fonda station was opened in 1904 and was located between Seiling and Canton near the South Canadian River.

A station was also opened in Longdale when the work at Cantonment was abandoned and many of the people moved away from there. Much of the lumber was used, as was the practice, at Cantonment. The Longdale church was served by many missionaries including Linscheid, Toews, Friesen, and Wiebe.

Another work was started at Deer Creek in 1924 by Rev. J. B. Ediger. In 1928, a small congregation was organized composed of eleven members and, in 1930, the church building was dedicated. Missionaries serving the Deer Creek church in addition to Ediger have been J. J. Kliewer, Arthur Friesen, H. M. Dalke, and August Schmidt. John Heap of Birds was the native helper for well over twenty years.³⁶

Churches present today

Presently, there are four Indian congregations. These are the Bethel Mennonite Church, Hammon; the Zion Mennonite Church, Canton; the Seiling Indian Mennonite Church, Seiling; and the Koinonia Mennonite Church, Clinton.

35. Ruth Linscheid, *Red Moon* (Newton: United Printing, 1973), p. 6.

36. Connie L. Hart, p. 14.



Countless leaders have committed themselves to the Mennonite church among the Arapaho and Cheyenne: *Rose Birdshead, Canton; Kate Osage, Longdale; and Homer Hart, Hammon (1956).*

Zion, Canton: looking for leaders

The Zion Mennonite Church is located in Blaine County, south of the town of Canton. The building stands on a part of the allotment of Karl Ice, an Arapaho. Karl died at the age of eighteen. Ten acres of his allotment was purchased by the Mennonite Mission Board in 1909.

In 1965, 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres, including a small house, were sold. The remaining 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ acres were deeded to the Zion Mennonite Church in 1971.

In 1940, two lots were purchased within the city limits of Canton by the General Conference Mennonite Church to be used as a parsonage. In 1979, the parsonage was sold due to a lack of use for there was no pastor or missionary. Maintenance of the property, which included a house, became difficult for the small congregation.

The congregation is composed primarily of Arapaho people. In recent years, it has experienced several long periods without pastor or missionary help. During those periods, several lay leaders have emerged and have given strong leadership to the congregation. These have included the late Arthur Sutton, Mary Meeks, and Rose Birdshead.

Over the years, this congregation has worked with other Indian churches and missions in various programs and outreach ministries, including summer Bible schools, retreat programs for children and youth, and camping programs for families. They have opened their doors to grieving families who have used their facilities for funeral services. A cemetery is located just east of the building.

The present leaders, Mary Meeks [died, Nov. 1987] and Rose Birdshead, feel that younger leadership is needed. They need a facilitator from the outside to help with the work of the church and to develop leadership. A voluntary service couple, the David Scherks, fulfilled that role for a period of time and provided good leadership and aided development. Lyman and Adeline Sprunger, retired but living near the community, continue to provide crisis pastoral care when called upon. Both Mary and Rose do well in providing local leadership but desire outside help.

Through the Oklahoma Convention, especially in the last decade, financial help has come from Oklahoma congregations through the General Conference. The local people have appreciated this effort.

The congregation joined the General Conference in 1971. Recently, the congregation was asked by the present workers, Robert and Nancy Koehn, to look at their mission and set priorities. They developed the following:

Mission: Encourage others to come to hear the word of God. Help others, adults, children to understand the word. A place for study and worship.

Method: Pick up children in the community so we can have a Sunday school for them.³⁷

Many names are remembered by the congregation which include the Rodolphe Petters, the H. T. Neufelds, the G. A. Linscheids, Benno Toews, Arthur Friesens, Alfred Wiebes, H. M. Dalkes, August Schmidts. There are others such as D. B. Hirschler.

The charter members of this church were Lizzie Raven, Ella Stander, Laura Sage, Minnie Arrow, and Phillip Rabbit.

Bethel, Hammon: youth eager for schools

The Bethel Mennonite Church is now located in Hammon having been moved from the original eighty-acre tract upon which it was founded. The congregation has membership in the General Confer-

37. Robert and Nancy Koehn. Document developed following sermons in four Indian congregations, based on response from worshippers, 1987.

ence Mennonite Church. A new church building was dedicated in 1958.

Missionary and pastoral leaders through the years since its beginning have been Henry J. Kliewers, J. B. Edigers, Arthur Friesens, Norman Bartels. Others, such as the Derksens, have served there for short periods of time.

The church has been effective in nurturing young people. Fruits from this effort came in the latter years of the ministry of Rev. Ediger and in the years of Arthur Friesen and the Norman Bartels, through the education of many youth both at Bethel College and at Oklahoma Bible Academy. In this list of names are Samuel C. Hart, Lawrence H. Hart, Robert Standingwater, Ramona R. Hart (Canadian Mennonite Bible College), who either attended Bethel College or attended and graduated.

Those from this congregation or connected to it and who attended the Oklahoma Bible Academy (OBA) in Meno are Paul Hart, Patricia Hoffman, Nancy Ross. Other students attended OBA from other communities. Except for Pat Hoffman Rhoads, who went on for more schooling and received a law degree from the School of Law in Denver University and lost her life in a tragic automobile accident, all the other students of Mennonite-related schools are still living and making a contribution to the betterment of the Cheyenne people. The greatest strength of the Bethel church was in motivating its Indian youth to higher educational pursuits.

The church has also been strong in other areas of youth activities such as music. Mary Bartel organized a youth choir which not only ministered in music locally but to other churches as well. Many children and youth took part in youth retreats which were begun in 1949 at Longdale. These retreats were held for well over a decade and eventually used the facilities at Roman Nose State Park.

Early native helpers in the congregation included Alfrich Heap of Birds. In 1917, Homer Hart was gradually nurtured as a native helper. He then spent well over forty-five years being an interpreter and finally a preacher. At first, as an interpreter of an English sermon, he would have the preacher pause after a sentence. When Homer would complete the translation in Cheyenne for the non-English-speaking members, the missionary would continue his sermon. Gradually, the pause came at longer periods of speaking, perhaps a whole paragraph of sermon notes. Homer then could repeat the sermon word for word. Most remarkably, in the later years of Ediger's ministry, which followed H. J. Kliewer's ministry, Ediger could preach a whole sermon, sometimes thirty minutes in length and Homer would follow, word for word in Cheyenne, the entire sermon. His translation abilities were unmatched.

Seiling Indian: bilingual and traditional

The Seiling Indian Mennonite Church was begun in 1955. By this time, most of the Indian people who had lived in the Fonda area had moved into the town of Seiling. Two buildings were moved onto a lot which had a house serving as the parsonage.

At first, the church was the only one for Indian people. Later, the Southern Baptists and the Methodists did establish churches which were eventually closed. Because of its longer history, the Mennonite church survived. More recently Pentecostal groups have established work in Seiling.

The Seiling Indian community is the most traditional of all Cheyenne communities. Over the years the annual renewal of the sacred arrows of the Cheyenne is held nearby. The sun dance is held there every year.

This congregation has not joined the General Conference. Leadership for developing closer ties to the General Conference and the Western District as well as the Oklahoma Convention has been lacking. Though work has been done in youth ministry, not many of the youth are active in the life of the congregation. A few young adults are beginning to take leadership positions. Of all the four churches, this one has most consistently had bilingual services. The people enjoy singing Cheyenne hymns. A few can still read the Scriptures in Cheyenne even though it is hard to do. And most prayers are in Cheyenne.

Missionary names for this congregation are G. A. Linscheids, Alfred Wiebes, and Clifford Koehns.

Koinonia, Clinton: active in ministry

The Koinonia Mennonite Church was formerly called the Indian Mennonite Church. Its building is located on Cheyenne-Arapaho tribal lands under a quit claim deed, and this deed was executed while the land was in government ownership.

The present church building was dedicated in 1951 replacing the original structure which had been built on the former Red Wheat Allotment in 1898. Originally, under the leadership of M. M. Horsch, J. B. Ediger gave much leadership to this congregation. The name Koinonia was adopted by the congregation in 1966, two years after it had joined the Western District Conference. In 1971, the congregation affiliated with the General Conference. Leadership then was provided by Lawrence H. Hart.

G. A. Linscheid, J. H. Epp, Arthur Friesen, Herbert M. Dalke, and Herman Walde have also provided leadership to the congregation.

During the past forty-eight years, nearly a half century, a women's group has been the pillar of the church. Organized by Mrs. J. B. Ediger in 1939, the Star Mission Club has been the bulwark of the congregation.

In the early part of the 1970s and the last part of the 1960s, the congregation was active in ministry. It helped to organize local community efforts in addressing the alcoholism which had deeply affected the families of the community as well as the church. The pastor, Lawrence Hart, directed a program for education in alcohol and for intervention and post-treatment care. As a result, alcoholism was accepted as a disease.

Other ministries grew out of this effort and led to work with children and youth who were being neglected largely as a result of alcohol abuse in the home. The Committee of Concern became the focal point of this endeavor. An emergency shelter was developed. When a building could not be rented in Clinton, the church purchased, with the help of Church Extension Services, a nice home in a residential neighborhood willing to have such a facility in its immediate area. Efforts were made to involve other concerned Mennonites. Roy Dick of the Bethel Mennonite Church in Hydro provided excellent leadership. Also involved from the Pleasant View Mennonite Church was Dean Schantz and Alvin Yoder. Locally, much support was received from Palmer Becker, pastor of the First Mennonite Church in Clinton and from Alfred Schultz, a member of that congregation.

The church participated in the youth ministries such as annual retreats. The pastor provided services, with other missionaries and pastors, at the Concho Boarding School. Daily Vacation Bible Schools were held each summer, some of them in cooperation with the First Mennonite Church, Clinton.

In response to the questionnaire of the purpose of the congregation by Robert and Nancy Koehn, the church had this response:

Mission: To be able to worship, pray, hear the word of God. To be a light to the community; Christians called out of the world but part of the world. To share the good news of Jesus Christ. To strengthen and promote Christianity in Indian families.

Method: Support one another during emotionally difficult times. Give a special invitation to inactive members to join in worship. Encourage youth to be a part of the fellowship. Learn what it means to be a witness for Christ. We cannot be empowered apart from the fellowship of the church. Study the Bible. Be a sharing community. Encourage others, especially family and people we love, to come for worship. Give what is required; work, funds, to keep the church going.³⁸

38. Koehn and Koehn.

Churches can play a part

The four Indian congregations are now a part of the Mennonite Indian Leaders Council (MILC), organized to develop self-determination practices within the context of the church. The council is the vehicle for relating to other Indian work such as that in Arizona among the Hopi and in Montana among the Northern Cheyenne. Together this group relates to the Commission on Home Ministries.

Leadership which is indigenous is slow to emerge but there is encouragement. Over the years since Samuel S. Haury arrived, countless leaders have committed themselves to the Mennonite church among the Arapaho and Cheyenne. Those leaders are now gone. The names Alfrich Heap of Birds, Robert Hamilton, Homer Hart, John Heap of Birds, Guy Heap of Birds, Kias, Percy Sitting Bull, Jason Beard, Dan Allrunner, Harvey Whiteshield, Willie Meeks are but a few names in memory. All of these, however, are excellent role models for our youth. Some were traditional chiefs who balanced their tribal roles with a deep Christian commitment. Some became as effective as any missionary or teacher sent by the General Conference. The future of the churches lies in what was written by Lawrence H. Hart in a paper, fulfilling an assignment in one of the classes at Bethel College:

Churches can too play a large part in terms of their special contributions. Missionaries are still needed . . . and should have training in cultural anthropology and in the principles of sound human relations.

A corps of highly qualified Indian leaders to meet the new day of adjustments is perhaps the greatest need of all. This means pastors and religious educators but it also involves professional level leaders in other vocations. . . . College ability youth need to be discovered and provided encouragement and support.³⁹

The four congregations meet for joint worship services each fifth Sunday of the year. They praise God for what he has done through their respective churches and pray for God's continued blessing upon the work started over one hundred years ago. Scriptures are often read in Cheyenne and Arapaho. Prayers are spoken in their own language. A new Cheyenne songbook, the result of the Mennonite Indian Leaders Council's efforts, is regularly used among the Cheyenne congregations. Arapaho songs, not yet set in written language nor set to music, are sung by those who know them through oral tradition.

They are beginning plans for a celebration of a Maggie Leonard Sunday which they hope will be conferencewide. They also will host a

39. Lawrence H. Hart, "What Is the Future of Uncle Sam's Wards?" Unpublished paper delivered at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, 1954.

special tour in April 1988 of those interested in visiting the congregations and its people to learn more about the work being done. They know for certain that the words of the prophet Isaiah have been and are being fulfilled:

So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:11).

3. Churches growing in faith

New Hopedale: special link to the Bible school

Wilma McKee

They came with hope in the Lord. They came with a determination born of despair. The Mennonites who were to become the founders of the New Hopedale (*Neu Hoffnungsthal*) Mennonite Church in Meno, Oklahoma, came from a background of isolation and impoverishment. For seventy-five years they had lived in Volhynia, Russia, separated from others of their faith, working as weavers, laborers, and dairymen. They lacked in education and leadership. Also, their experience in agriculture did not apply well to farming in Kansas. The results were a loss of spirituality and community vitality.

When military conscription became the law in Russia, one of the Karlswalde church elders, Tobias Unruh, came with a group of leaders to North America in 1873 to check out the land. One year later, 700 of them arrived in the middle of a bitterly cold winter. They had requested \$40,000 from the Pennsylvania Mennonites for passage and had received enough for half of the number who wanted to come. Five hundred of those arriving were destitute, and fellow Mennonites advised them to go no farther. Places were prepared for their stay during winter in Pennsylvania. Nearly all disregarded this advice and came on to Kansas, where they spent the winter in storehouses, sheds, and boxcars.

Kansas Mennonites immediately organized the Kansas Local Relief Committee. Families were placed (with the help of the Santa Fe Railroad) on forty-acre farms near Canton, Kansas. In 1875, the Canton Mennonite Church was started and the Kansas Conference ordained Johann Ratzlaff (who came from the Hoffnungsau congre-



When the Cherokee Strip opened in 1893, many Mennonites were in the first ranks of the run for land: *start of the land rush south of Arkansas City, Kansas.*

gation) as their elder. A school for children and adults was also started.¹

The congregation, however, was not satisfied with its lot. When the Cherokee Strip opened in 1893, these Polish Mennonites were the largest single group to take advantage of the run. They came on borrowed money and some in complete poverty. They were often in the first ranks of the run.² About 150 families from the Canton (name later changed to Emmanuel) church plus many Polish Russians who were not associated with the Canton church relocated west of Enid. Those who were not successful in filing were able to buy from discouraged land owners within a year or so.

Ministers from the Western District Conference ministered to them as they met together from the beginning. Elder Christian Ramseier of Orienta, Oklahoma, itinerant pastor for the Conference, visited them. Other Mennonites from Durham, Kansas, joined them

1. David Haury, *Prairie People* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981), pp. 48, 50, 133.

2. Marvin Elroy Kroeker, "The Mennonites of Oklahoma to 1907." Unpublished thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1954, p. 55.



Hosting the meeting of the General Conference in Meno in 1914 required much planning and cooperation: *tents erected for sleeping and a building for cooking.*

and the area became a congregating place for Mennonites from 1893 on.

In March 1895, Elder Johann Ratzlaff along with several other families followed his congregation to Oklahoma and settled on a quarter of land. On June 13, 1895, an organizational meeting was held in the basement of the Benjamin P. Jantz home. Apparently there were twenty-five present at the meeting but the only names listed are the following: Johann Ratzlaff, Adam Becker, Ben P. Koehn, Henry Koehn, William Jantz, David and Jacob Wedel, Peter Becker, John Johnson, Adam Eck, Ben Eck, Ben J. Johnson, and Ben Johnson (Benjamin P. Jantz, in whose house they met).³ A decision was made that all twenty-five present would be charter members. Ratzlaff was chosen by vote of the male members to be elder and superintendent of the Sunday school. Two ministers from the Canton church, Tobias Unruh and Tobias P. Wedel, soon came to help and also Karl Schartner of South Dakota. Thus New Hopedale has been said to be the only Oklahoma church with a Kansas elder.

From the beginning the congregation met in two places. A smaller group had settled north of Ringwood, as horse-and-buggy travel made the distance a problem. This group met in the Riverside school and the Meno group met in a log cabin school, with the groups meeting together regularly for special services.

3. H. U. Schmidt, "Fifty Years of the New Hopedale Mennonite Church." Unpublished paper, June 15, 1945, p. 1.

In 1896, the first church building was built north of the present cemetery on land given by Elder Ratzlaff. The church gave him \$150 to clear the title. The church was incorporated in 1905.

The town of Meno was organized in 1902 and named by its founder, Peter Kane, in honor of Menno Simons. The spelling was shortened either by mistake or for simplicity. By 1910, 205 Russian-born Germans lived in the Meno area, most of them Mennonites.

Perhaps members of the New Hopedale church remembered the school which had been established in the Canton church, which had boasted of over 100 students, of whom many were adults. In 1911, they organized the Menno Preparatory School. Abe Unruh writes in *The Helpless Poles* that it is possibly the only such school totally organized by the “helpless Poles.”⁴ The school served the community in Bible instruction and the German language until 1917 when it became the Oklahoma Bible Academy.

In 1913, the church ordained David H. Schmidt and John J. Ratzlaff. Schmidt served until 1917 when he chose to leave the church and join a Mennonite Brethren church because he believed immersion was the only correct form of baptism. Ratzlaff is remembered for the singing school he organized which was well attended in all kinds of weather. He served the church until 1921.⁵

In 1914, the second church building was built. The first church was moved south of the present church and used as a second room for the Preparatory School. In the same year, the New Hopedale church hosted the General Conference. This undertaking required much work, planning, and cooperation, and built unity within the congregation. Delegates came by train and were transported to Meno by horse and buggy. Tents were erected for many delegates to sleep in and a building constructed especially to cook and serve meals.⁶

Jacob B. Epp was elder from 1919 to 1921 and also taught at Oklahoma Bible Academy. Many of the church’s other ministers have been active in the school. H. U. Schmidt served the church from 1921 to 1948, the longest term of any minister.

In 1923-1924, a non-denominational tabernacle called the Upper Room Bible School was built in Meno by a man named Nagel. New Hopedale lost some members to this movement. In spite of this, by 1930, the church had over 300 members and was the largest Mennonite church in Oklahoma.⁷

4. Abe Unruh, *The Helpless Poles* (no publisher given, 1973), pp. 170-71.

5. Mrs. John Schmidt, “History of the New Hopedale Church,” from diary of Mrs. Jake Lettkeman, p. 4.

6. Rudi Becker, “Founding of the New Hopedale Mennonite Church, Meno, Oklahoma.” History at seventy-fifth anniversary, p. 3.

7. Douglas Hale, *Germans from Russia in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), p. 42.

By 1940, an assistant was needed and Albert Unruh was ordained and served for eight years. Unruh was the last minister to serve both churches, as West New Hopedale became a separate church in 1946. With this separation, New Hopedale lost 51 members from their rolls, leaving a membership of 308.

In 1949, Arnold Epp became the church's pastor, serving until 1955. In the spring of 1950, the church built its first parsonage. By December of the same year, the cornerstone was laid for their third and present building. A month later, the first service was held in the basement and by December 21, 1952, the completed church was dedicated. The total cost was \$45,000, not counting voluntary labor.⁸

During the years, members sometimes moved to Enid because of their vocations and often moved their membership to the Grace church. But a more serious loss was experienced in 1954 when twenty-one members were excommunicated for advocating the doctrine of universalism as taught by J. B. Frey. The church leaders felt they had to take the action they did to save the church from more serious division. The ones dismissed felt they were treated in an un-Christian manner. The entire church suffered over this painful division which was referred to as the Grace Chapel schism.⁹

Ben Nickel was pastor from 1955 to 1957, and Ben Friesen from 1958 to 1965. An outstanding event in 1962 was the Myron Augsburger meetings which were a joint effort of Oklahoma Bible Academy and New Hopedale church.

Willard Schrag, pastor from 1966 to 1969, was active in the Oklahoma retreat program, serving on the Retreat Committee and directing retreats. Kenneth Schrag served from May 1973 to June 1974. Lyman Sprunger, a former missionary at Seiling, Oklahoma, served from March 1975 to June 1981, when he retired from active ministry. The present pastor, John W. Voth from Delft, Minnesota, began his ministry in 1981. He has been active in the work of the Oklahoma Convention, serving as its president.

Many members have given service in various areas. Sister Eva Becker was trained as a deaconess at Bethel Deaconess Hospital and served the community in health care. Harold and Ruth Ratzlaff were supported by the church as missionaries to India. Harold is a grandson of Johann Ratzlaff, the church's founder and first minister. August Schmidt, administrator at OBA, served the church as men's

8. August Schmidt, "New Hopedale Mennonite Church History—Continued," Unpublished paper, June 13, 1970, p. 2."

9. History committee of New Hopedale Mennonite Church: Helen Ratzlaff, Henry H. Unruh, Walter Unruh, John Voth (pastor).

choir director and in many other ways during his thirty-year membership at New Hopedale. Richard Boehr, a Bible teacher at OBA, served the church faithfully until he took an assignment with the Commission on Overseas Mission in Taiwan. Ministers who grew up in the Meno church are Levi Koehn and Bob Koehn.

During World War I, five members of the church were imprisoned in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for refusing to serve in the army. They were Henry J. Becker, Simon Unruh, Jake Jantz, Joe Jantz, and Pete Unruh.

After World War II, three men, Henry H. Unruh, Walter Ratzlaff, and Arthur Decker, went on the ship *S.S. Rockland Victory* to care for horses that were being shipped to Poland to get that land back on its feet. The church has an interesting diary that was written by Henry Unruh. There were 777 horses on board and 44 died.

Members of the New Hopedale church have served in Civilian Public Service during World War II and later in voluntary service. Some have gone into Christian service through various missions and ministries.

Church members gave voluntary labor to help build the Seiling Indian Church. The church has ties with other Mennonite churches through Mennonite Central Committee (meat canning and relief sales), and Mennonite Disaster Service programs. They take active part in programs of the Oklahoma Convention, such as retreat and Choice Books. Their women and men have been regular attenders of the Western District retreats at Camp Mennosciah. Oklahoma Bible Academy continues to receive their support.

The story of the New Hopedale Mennonite Church of Meno, Oklahoma, is one of needs being answered. It tells of educational needs which resulted in the establishment of a school, of the need for leadership, and the calling forth of strong leaders. It relates physical need to the faithfulness of the larger church community. It speaks powerfully of helplessness turned to new hope in Christ and the strength and vitality which resulted. The story reveals God clearly as he works with his people in grace and sufficiency.

Saron: strong missionary roots

Wilma McKee

A few scattered Mennonite families located in the area referred to as Alamo in the early 1890s.¹⁰ In 1894, Christian Ramseier from Hal-

10. Haury, *Prairie People*, p. 133-34.

stead, Kansas, homesteaded on a 160-acre tract of land two miles west of Orienta. The Ramseier family moved to their land on February 25, 1895.¹¹

Ramseier's arrival in Oklahoma Territory proved to have far-reaching effects, not only on the Mennonite families who were to become the Saron Mennonite Church, but also on many groups of Mennonites scattered the length and breadth of Oklahoma Territory.

Originally from Poland, Ramseier was a man dedicated to preaching the faith of Jesus Christ. His Mennonite beliefs of service and unity in Christ are clearly evident in the ten years he lived in Oklahoma. His immediate action was to gather the twenty-two believers together in his home and have Sunday school and a worship service. Later they met in a sod schoolhouse near the Ramseier home.¹²

John Penner, Beatrice, Nebraska, on a four-week visit among Mennonites in Oklahoma, reported to the Western District Conference in 1895 that it would be desirable for them to be organized into a church. J. S. Hirschler, itinerant minister for the Western District, reported on the group also in 1896, giving the number attending as thirty-one and writing that Christian Ramseier and John F. Bartel had been called by the group to be their ministers.¹³

On January 18, 1897, the church formally organized with eleven charter members. In fall of the same year, Saron submitted its constitution, which was patterned after the Halstead Mennonite Church constitution, to the Western District for approval. It was accepted and, at the same time, Ramseier accepted his first Western District Conference assignment which lasted for the next eight years. He was instructed to find and visit scattered Mennonites. A year later at Conference, Ramseier reported 130 days of traveling as itinerant minister by horseback and seventy-five sermons preached.¹⁴

Oklahoma Territory was a large field and the laborers were few, so all of the Oklahoma churches as well as Saron church were encouraged when Ramseier was ordained an elder in 1898 by Rodolphe Petter of the Indian mission at Cantonment. Now the Conference Committee for Itinerant Ministry reported he would be fully authorized to serve wherever requested in his ministerial trips: to organize churches, install ministers, baptize, and serve the Lord's Supper. He was asked to concentrate his efforts on these small groups which

11. Fiftieth Anniversary Program of Saron Mennonite Church, November 14, 1948, "The Founding and History of the Saron Mennonite Church."

12. Fiftieth Anniversary Program.

13. Western District minutes: Report of the Committee for Itinerant Preaching, 1895-96.

14. Western District minutes: Report of Committee for Itinerant Preaching, 1897.

were isolated and he spoke in his reports of their shared joys when they came together.¹⁵

Meanwhile in the Saron church in April 1899, D. D. Lohrentz and D. F. Ratzlaff were ordained as evangelists. The Lohrentzes had joined the Saron church one week after its organization. Both Lohrentz and Ratzlaff were ordained to the ministry in November 1902.¹⁶

Ramseier evidently felt frustration over leaving his church. At the same time, he was deeply moved by the needs of the other scattered groups. In one report to the Conference, he said, "When I look around at home I hear the bidding, 'Remain at home.' When I look into the [larger] church, I see there is work there, more than enough." The church itself was partly encouraging and partly against his time spent away from them. He wrote with humility about his lacks, and hoped a new itinerant minister could be found, but then agreed to serve until one could be found.¹⁷ In 1900, the people in Oklahoma provided him with a vehicle so he no longer had to go the many miles by horseback.

In November 1905, the Ramseyer family moved to Alabama. They had been rooted into the church's beginnings so deeply that the Saron church suffered severe loss and discouragement, and questioned whether they should continue as a church. The Western District Conference sent John Ratzlaff, of their neighboring church at Meno, to chair a meeting over this question. The result was a decision to continue building up the church under the leadership of Lohrentz and Ratzlaff.¹⁸ Within a few weeks evangelistic meetings were held with H. R. Voth as speaker and six new members were received into the church. At a business meeting on Thanksgiving Day, the decision was made to build a church building on the present church site. Six months later, on May 27, 1906, the building was dedicated to the Lord. At this time the Saron church had thirty-seven members.¹⁹

After twelve years of service, D. F. Ratzlaff moved to California, leaving D. D. Lohrentz as sole pastor and leader. For a short time, Lohrentz and family lived in Canada, but returned in 1914 to the Saron church ministry.

Saron Mennonite was active from the first in Oklahoma Conven-

15. Western District minutes: Report of the Committee for Itinerant Preaching, 1895-1904; Travel Report of C. Ramseyer in Oklahoma, 1898.

16. Saron Mennonite Church chronicle. Unpublished paper written for dedication of new church building, 1940.

17. Western District minutes: Report of Committee for Itinerant Preaching, 1899.

18. Saron Mennonite Church Seventy-fifth Anniversary History, November 1973.

19. Fiftieth Anniversary Program.

tion work, and in 1922 celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary while hosting the annual convention.²⁰

In 1925, Lohrentz asked to withdraw from full-time ministry because of failing health, so the church called A. A. Ewert of Tampa, Kansas, to share the work. He served until 1932.

During the years 1933-1935, J. B. Epp co-pastored the church with Lohrentz. On June 12, 1935, Lohrentz died after thirty-six years of service: twenty-five as full-time pastor and eleven as assistant pastor. His death left the church without a full-time pastor, so P. K. Kroeker and August Schmidt were elected and on September 13, 1936, were ordained as ministers. During their ministry, the church made the change from German to English.²¹

At intervals, Saron church has been called on to reevaluate its mission and to renew its faith in times of overwhelming loss. First with the loss of their founding minister Ramseier in 1905, and again when Lohrentz, their pastor of thirty-six years, died in 1935. It seemed too soon on January 21, 1940, to face a difficult time of testing again. On this extremely cold Sunday morning after Sunday school and worship services, the congregation returned to their homes, only to be notified by fire alarm about three in the afternoon that their church building was on fire. Within an hour, this fire of undetermined origin reduced the brick veneer building of nine and a half years to smoldering embers.²²

Once again the schoolhouse became a haven as the task of building a new church building was considered. With sacrifices in time and money, coupled with enthusiasm and commitment, the work was started and by June 16 of the same year, the church was finished and dedicated. The brick building of thirty-four feet by fifty-six feet provided adequate room for the congregation which now had a Sunday school enrollment of 140.²³

In 1943, H. P. Fast became their pastor. At this time, four acres of ground were added and a parsonage purchased and moved on the grounds. Fast served until 1951 and his pastoral term was a time of many changes for the church.²⁴

The church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary on November 14, 1948. During these years, Norman Lohrentz, grandson of a former pastor Lohrentz, was ordained as missionary and went to Africa to serve.

20. Saron Mennonite Church chronicle.

21. Fiftieth Anniversary Program.

22. *Fairview Republican*, Fairview, Oklahoma, November 27, 1958.

23. Saron Mennonite Church chronicle.

24. Saron Church History Committee: Elmer and Carolyn Franz, M. Henry and Elsie Koehn, Arnold Curby, pastor.

In July 1951, Waldo Flickinger, missionary from the Go Ye Mission of Tahlequah, Oklahoma, became minister and served for four years. While he pastored the Saron church, Vernon Buller was ordained into the ministry in 1954.

A. C. Siebert, Gothenburg, Nebraska, pastored the church from 1952 until 1963. On November 30, 1958, Saron celebrated its sixtieth anniversary with a membership of 120.

From 1963 to 1971, the church was served by Frank Huebert. Samuel Epp served from 1971 to 1976. During his term, the church celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in November 1973. The Saron church which was organized in 1897 was actually seventy-five years old in 1972.²⁵

Don Crisp pastored the Saron church from 1976 to 1984 and Arnold Curby, present minister, began in 1984.²⁶

The Saron church has had a strong missionary vision since its early beginnings in 1897. In particular, they have supported those who have gone out from their church as missionaries. On the local level, they have served in many areas, such as jail services in Enid; Training School for Boys in Helena; and homes for the aged in Fairview.

They have carried on faithfully in spite of difficulties, with regular church and Sunday school services, midweek prayer and Bible study, Christian Endeavor, and Ladies Mission Society.²⁷ There are at present seventy-three members in the church, with four youth and twenty children.²⁸

At their sixtieth anniversary, they used the old hymn "Come Thou Fount" and quoted from 1 Samuel 7:12, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." Truly the Lord has been their Ebenezer—their stone of help.²⁹

Medford: oldest of the northern congregations

Robert R. Coon

When the Cherokee Strip was opened for settlement, many Mennonites from the Kansas area took advantage of the run in 1893 be-

25. Saron Church History Committee.

26. Seventy-fifth Anniversary History.

27. A. C. Siebert, "A Brief Survey of the Founding and History of the Saron Mennonite Church" (Sixtieth Anniversary History, November 30, 1958), from statement made by Peter B. Buller.

28. Saron Church History Committee.

29. Sixtieth Anniversary History.

cause of the promise of land.³⁰ Those who settled in the Medford area came largely from the Bruderthal, Alexanderwohl, and Hoffnungsau churches in central Kansas. Later, others came from the Newton, Kansas, area.

When Jacob W. Regier came to the Medford area in 1895 as an itinerant minister (*Reiseprediger*), he visited ten families.

In 1896, several of the Mennonite families living around the town of Medford sent a petition to the Western District Conference asking that it might help them to begin as a church. The Conference responded favorably and sent Christian Krehbiel and Wilhelm Ewert, with the support of the Home Mission Committee, to observe the situation and act accordingly. After some consultation with the Mennonite families in Medford, the suggestion of electing evangelists for the present and organizing later was accepted. Henry J. Gaede and Peter W. Enns were elected for the purpose of leading and edifying the small group in an orderly and preparatory manner. Later in the year, when Krehbiel returned to Medford, he found that Gaede had assumed the ministry of the Word and Enns was in charge of the Sunday school.

Sunday school and worship services began in different homes of the congregation and later were moved to a schoolhouse located two miles east of Medford. Some members lived as far as ten miles away from the schoolhouse but faithfully drove to services with horse and buggy or by horseback.

Of the three northernmost active General Conference churches in Oklahoma, the Medford congregation was the first to organize. On February 2, 1897, the organization took place at the farm of Dietrick Enns, one mile west and one and a half miles south of Medford. The church joined the General Conference in 1898.

Charter members of the Medford Mennonite Church were: Mr. and Mrs. P. W. Enns; Mr. and Mrs. Dietrick Enns; Mr. and Mrs. Peter M. Reimer; Isaac Graves; Mr. and Mrs. Peter A. Reimer; Gerhard Reimer; Mr. and Mrs. Heinrich Schroeder; Mr. and Mrs. Heinrich Neufeld; Mr. and Mrs. Heinrich Graves; Mr. and Mrs. Martin Dirksen; Jacob Reimer; Mr. and Mrs. Henry J. Gaede; and Peter Graves.

The congregation grew to about fifty members after the first ten years, more than doubling its charter member number.

Henry J. Gaede was chosen from the congregation as its first pastor. He was ordained to the ministry by Peter Balzer, Goessel, Kan-

30. Committee members from this church who helped in the church's history: Ben T. Schmidt, Alvin Neuman, and Esther Johnson.

sas, on December 9, 1899. Gaede, a farmer and carpenter, had come with his family from Lehigh, Kansas, as a settler when the opening of the Cherokee Outlet gave him a chance to own his own farm. He moved into the Medford area in 1895.

Gaede served until 1916 when he moved to Arizona, having served the church for nineteen years. For the next four years, the church had no pastor. Then in 1920, the congregation extended a call to John Lichti of Deer Creek, Oklahoma. He came and served the church for twenty years.

Pastors and the dates they have served are as follows: Henry J. Gaede, 1897-1916; John Lichti, 1916-1920 (once a month), 1920-1938; A. G. Schmidt, 1938-1948; Ernest Baergen, 1949-1953; Henry D. Penner, 1953-1957; Jacob W. Nickel (interim), 1957-1959; Norman Bartel (interim), 1959-1960; Jacob B. Krause, 1960-1965; Albert Unruh (interim), 1965-1966; John Keller, 1966-1970; Robert Koehn (interim), 1970-1971; H. V. Brannon, 1971-1978; Walter Regier, 1978-present.

In those early years, the economic conditions were not good and the times were hard. In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of families moved away to California and elsewhere, to find better living conditions for their families.

The Medford Mennonite Church was built two miles north and two miles east of the town of Medford, Oklahoma. The wooden building was erected in 1909 and dedicated the same year. The acre of land on which the church was built was donated by Henry Froese, Sr. Henry J. Gaede was the carpenter.

The next church building was planned and organized in September 1946 by a building committee. The basement was begun in December and was completed in the spring of 1947. It was located just southeast of the original church building. A new building committee was elected in October 1947. This committee presented plans to the congregation for the sanctuary which would be built on the top of the basement. The congregation voted on September 8, 1952, to go ahead with the building. On August 2, 1954, the sanctuary was dedicated with Henry D. Penner as pastor of the congregation.

German was the prevailing language in the early years of the church. World War I forced the church to an English gospel hymnal and to preach in English part time. After the war was over, the congregation went back to German. In the late 1920s, some English began to be used on the side.

In later years the church took part in community services, community choirs and cantatas, community Thanksgiving services, the World Day of Prayer, and the Larry Jones Crusade. It invited others in the area to come and attend services. On the inter-Mennonite

level, it works with Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Central Committee, and meat canning.

Albert and Wilma Jantzen went out from the church to serve as missionaries to China. Eldon and Sylvia Schmidt Larson served under Missionary Aviation as missionaries to Brazil. John and Joy Keller Robertson went to voluntary service. The John Friesens worked with Mennonite Central Committee.

Ramon Reimer, Milton Reimer, Vernon Schmidt, Kenneth Schmidt, Harry Neufeld, John Friesen, and Argyle Janzen were all in Civilian Public Service during World War II.

The church feels good about its involvement in regular worship and Sunday School services, annual revival meetings, church workers' conferences, and the Oklahoma Convention annual meetings.

The congregation has worked with the Indian churches, helping in the building project at Hammon and also purchasing a tractor for the church there.

In its statement of faith, the congregation says, "Our basic beliefs are salvation by faith through grace, believing the infallible word of God, nonresistance, the virgin birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the faith of our fathers that gave it to us."

The congregation has a definite concern about the decrease in its membership. Young people, when grown and married, most often choose to settle outside the Medford area because of lack of industry and jobs in the community. Many of the older members choose to retire in different towns and states. The decrease in membership has also cut into the giving base, but the giving has increased per capita.

Like many other small, rural churches, the Medford church is facing the problem of survival. The increased mobility of population and economic uncertainty endanger its continued life and mission in Christian faith and work. However, the members have a prayer for their church, that it shall survive. They also have a prayer that they will receive divine wisdom for direction for their future as a church and that it will continue to present a positive witness for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Geary: rooted in its community

Wilma McKee

Five young Mennonite men from Halstead, Kansas, originally a part of the midnineteenth-century wave of immigrants from South Germany, became a part of Oklahoma history on April 19, 1892. They joined the run for land at a point about two miles east of Darlington. Jacob S. Krehbiel, John Horsch, J. M. Pletscher, Henry A. Lehman,



Jacob S. Krehbiel, 1864-1916: pastor of the Geary church and one of five young Mennonites who took part in the first Oklahoma land rush, 1892.

and Henry Schmutz staked their claims near what is now called Geary, Oklahoma, in Blaine County.³¹

Krehbiel, son of Christian Krehbiel, Halstead, was superintendent of the Indian mission at Darlington. By the fall of 1892, he and his wife moved to the settlement then called Garden Plains (later changed to Geary) to do missionary work among the Indians. A barn loft on the Krehbiel farm served as a first home, as well as a worship center for the new settlers. Abigail Ringelman Ruth, in her recollections about the family, writes of the Krehbiel farm:

He [Krehbiel] had built a two-story house and barn. He also planted three rows of mulberry trees around the buildings, a maple grove south of the house, besides many fruit trees and hedges. It was a very pretty place.³²

A Sunday school was organized and the first convert, Henry Stahlheber, was baptized on April 8, 1893. When it became available, the settlers used the Canadian Valley schoolhouse for a meeting place until Christian Krehbiel gave money for a building to be used for the mission work with the Indians. By Christmas 1894, Sunday services

31. Fred Ringelman, *History of First Mennonite Church, Geary, Oklahoma*. Unpublished history written for fiftieth anniversary, 1947, p. 1.

32. Abigail Ringelman Ruth, *Things I Remember or My Recollections About the Family of George and Luise Ringelman, My Parents*, pp. 12-13.



In 1898, the Geary congregation moved its building into town.

were conducted here with afternoon services for the Indians every two weeks.

On August 15, 1897, the church was formally organized with Christian Krehbiel officiating and J. S. Krehbiel elected as pastor. Twenty-two white people and three Indians became charter members. They were: J. S. and Katie Krehbiel, John and Elizabeth Horsch, Peter and Christine Weber, J. M. Pletscher, Barbara Pletscher, Fred and Susie Ringelman, J. D. and Anna Weber, Henry and Christine Schmutz, H. A. Lehman, August Weber, Henry Stahlheber, John Lowel, Emma Ringelman, Lizzie Ringelman Ruth, Emma Frass, Oneda Norton, Maria Houser, and George and Luise Ringelman.

The church was named Salem Mennonite but later changed to First Mennonite of Geary. On the first, third, and fifth Sundays of each month, sermons were in German; and on the second and fourth Sundays, in English.

In May of 1898, a railroad was built through Geary and the town quickly began to take shape. J. S. Krehbiel was asked to hold a union Sunday school, which he did, incorporating it with the Mennonite Sunday school and using a succession of store buildings under construction as meeting places. Boards laid across nail kegs and beer barrels served as benches.

Upon request from the townspeople in 1898, the church voted to move its building into town, feeling they could do a greater service in this way. The members loaded their country church on four wagons and transferred it to a lot granted to them in Geary by the townsite company. This eighteen-by-thirty-foot structure was the first church established in Geary.³³ This was probably the earliest effort of evangelism among non-Mennonites in the Western District.³⁴ An addition was soon added, complete with bell. This bell was the third bell placed on a Mennonite church in the United States.

Seventy names appeared on the first primary membership list. But as other church buildings were built in the town, members withdrew to attend the churches of their original membership. In 1898, the church joined the Western District Conference; and, in 1905, the General Conference. J. S. Krehbiel served the First Mennonite Church of Geary for twenty-four years until his death in 1916. He also traveled to other Oklahoma Mennonite churches for many years, serving as an elder at baptisms and communions.

“Brother Krehbiel was a man of kindly and sympathetic nature,” said Fred Ringelman, “combined with ability and rare good judgment, as a consequence he soon had the love and goodwill of the entire community.”³⁵

In July 1917, Henry Riesen, Gotebo, moved to Geary to serve as pastor for seven years. During his term, only the English language was used. Riesen also served as elder for neighboring Mennonite churches. He left in order to serve Bethel College as traveling representative in soliciting endowment funds.

H. D. Penner of Beatrice, Nebraska, became the next pastor for seven years beginning in 1926 and ending with his death. During his service, a new church building was built and dedicated on July 21, 1929, with Christian Krehbiel giving the dedicatory sermon.

For three years, the church was without a resident pastor, but Henry Hege of Corn served the congregation on many occasions. From 1936 to 1941, P. E. Frantz, Buhler, Kansas, was pastor and during this time a parsonage was added.

H. N. Harder was minister from 1943 to 1945. During this time, the church membership roll was revised with a number of members being dropped. Harder was active in the Oklahoma Convention serving as secretary of the Church Workers Committee, which sponsored the new retreat program for young people.

33. Marvin Kroeker, “Mennonites in the Oklahoma Runs,” *Mennonite Life* (July 1955), p. 115.

34. Haur, *Prairie People*, p. 123.

35. Fred Ringelman, *History*.

Abe H. Peters served from 1946 to 1951. At this time, the church was active in an annual Daily Vacation Bible School program which had an attendance of about 100 children, many from the surrounding churches.

Henry Hege was pastor of the church for fifteen years (1951-1965). He came to Geary from the Bergthal church near Corn, but originally came from Germany as a young man to the Geary community. He had lived with the Walter Lehman family near Geary and considered the people of the church his family. Hege gave a lifetime of service to the Oklahoma Convention churches, supporting faithfully the Western District and General Conference work. During his ministry, bonds of love between the members and the church were strengthened.

After Hege's death, John K. Warkentin served for one year and Bob Schmidt, a student at Bethel College, for one year in 1967. Students from college coming with Schmidt built new interest among church youth.

From 1968 to 1972, Perry Beachy was the pastor and the Oklahoma Convention met for the first time in the Geary church. Beachy took an active interest in Oklahoma Retreat. A new project for the church was a day-care center in the church basement for children of working mothers and low-income families. General Conference Voluntary Service workers came from Canada, Switzerland, and Haiti to help in the program. The influence of the church extended, as in the past, into the community.

In 1973, when Willard Schrag came for two years as pastor, he too was active in retreat work. He served as a committee member and director. Ruth, his wife, was instrumental in organizing Oklahoma Mennonite Women.

The present pastor is Clifford Koehn, who came from fifteen years of missionary work among the Indians at Seiling, Oklahoma. Koehn continues to serve the Seiling church on Wednesday evenings and also goes to his home church, Greenfield, for Sunday evening services.

First Mennonite has been a progressive church since its early beginnings. It is rooted deeply in the Geary community and its leaders have served Geary as mayor, council members, school board members, chamber of commerce members, and on the nursing home board. Mennonite farmers were often first in acquiring new types of machinery and adapting better methods of farming. They also took leadership in the soil conservation movement. Some members are active in business in the town, living in homes solidly middle-class or better. Theirs has been and continues to be a worthy contribution to their community.

For the most part, the church's early decision to be a town church has given more opportunity than problems, but at times some members have found themselves differing in viewpoint with the community. Their beliefs on lodge membership, war, divorce, and, in the early years, dancing, sometimes gave in to the culture surrounding them and sometimes remained firm. Members often differed in belief and the church allowed such differences.

The congregation has a strong respect for education and several members were among the early supporters of Bethel College. This strength has also caused change as youth with higher education often found limited job opportunities in this small, agricultural community and so moved elsewhere. Farm youth were also left out by the merger of farms. Over the years, membership has diminished to a regular attendance of twenty three. Although the local church lost members, many have profited by the First Mennonite Church heritage and have used it to contribute solidly to other church families and also to the outside world.

Deer Creek: with a prayer for the future

Robert R. Coon

The Deer Creek Mennonite Church is one of the Cherokee Strip land run congregations.³⁶ In 1893, Daniel Krehbiel and Henry Wicke staked out claims near the site which became the town of Deer Creek.³⁷ The early settlers came because of the promise of land, many of them living in dugouts until houses could be built. Most of them came from the Halstead and Moundridge, Kansas, communities. Others from the related South German communities in Iowa joined them. The Wickes, a non-Mennonite family, were drawn into the Mennonite church.

Most of the early Mennonite families who settled here began with little. They were thrifty, hardworking, and practiced mutual aid. Several men came on horseback, during the land run, to establish their claims. They went back later and returned with families and goods.

Many of the early settlers came, stayed a short time, and moved on, some to California. Menno Beudler sold out a few years after settling in Deer Creek. Jacob Haury left in 1901. Some cultural differences may have entered in, but their leaving was largely triggered by bad

36. Committee members from the church who helped in this church's history: Marvin Dester, Elsie Latschar, Marie Krehbiel, and Carl Kuehny.

37. Haury, *Prairie People*, p. 131.



John F. Moyer: one of two men called as pastors by the Deer Creek congregation from its membership.

crops, drought, freezing, and frugal living.

In the formative years of the congregation, Christian Ramseier, John Baer, Christian Krehbiel, Valentine Krehbiel, and Wilhelm Galle were *Reiseprediger* who were given much credit in starting and encouraging the church.³⁸

Galle of Moundridge, Kansas, led the organizational meeting of the church on August 27, 1899. The twenty-one charter members were: Mr. and Mrs. Dan Krehbiel; Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Dester; Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Haury; Mr. and Mrs. John Staufer; Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Dester; Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dester; Mr. and Mrs. Justus Hohmann; Mr. and Mrs. Adam Hohmann; Mr. and Mrs. Adam Lugenbill; John C. Peters; Christian Eberle; and Christian Goebel.³⁹

Christian Goebel was selected from the congregation as pastor in 1899. He went to Bethel College for additional education, but he took sick there and was unable to return. This left the congregation without a pastor in its second year of life. In 1901, Manassas Moyer, a well-educated minister, came from Fortuna, Missouri, to serve. His brief pastorate ended with his sudden death, December 7, 1903.

John C. Peters and John F. Moyer were called from the congregation to serve as pastors. Moyer later was an instructor and treasurer at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas. John Lichti then followed,

38. "Deer Creek's New Mennonite Church Dedication 30th," *Blackwell Journal-Tribune* (Nov. 23, 1952), p. 1.

39. Rev. H. E. Miller, "History of Mennonite Church at Deer Creek Oklahoma. Read at Forty-fifth Anniversary," *Mennonite Weekly Review* (Dec. 7, 1944).

coming to the church from Lucien, Oklahoma. A trend of calling pastors from the outside had begun. The next pastor, Abraham Tieszen, came from the Freeman, South Dakota, area.

Pastors who have served the congregation are: Christian Goebel, 1899; Manassas Moyer, 1901-1903; John C. Peters, 1904-1908; John F. Moyer, 1908-1912; John Lichti, 1912-1920; Abraham Tieszen, 1921; Gerhard Friesen, 1922-1927; Andrew S. Bechtel, 1928-1937; Herbert E. Miller, 1937-1946; Richard Ratzlaff, 1948-1951; Carl J. Landes, 1951-1953; William Unrau, 1954-1957; Boyd Bonebrake, 1958-1961; Elmer Enszt, 1961-1963; John Hiebert, 1963-1964; Willard Stucky, 1964-1968; Ted Koontz, 1968-1969; Don Schmidt, 1969-1970; Ralph Weber, 1970-1971; H. B. Schmidt, 1971-1975; Jerald Hiebert, 1975-1976; Arnold Epp, 1976-1980; Donald Kaufman, interim; Robert R. Coon, 1982-1986;⁴⁰ Miller Staybrook, interim; Peter Neufeld, 1987-present.

Five pastors, Christian Goebel, John C. Peters, John F. Moyer,⁴¹ and Carl J. Landes⁴² were called from or were sons of the congregation. John Moyer was a minister in the United Methodist Church for a short time. Herbert Dester and Mrs. E. G. Kaufman (Hazel Dester) became missionaries.⁴³ Jean Marie Krehbiel Bundy served for a short time in Zaire under Commission on Overseas Mission.

In the beginning, families met for Sunday school classes in their homes. Then, later, they began meeting in a schoolhouse one mile west of Deer Creek. The schoolhouse was later moved to the north end of the town.

The first church building was built in 1902 on Deer Creek's main street, three blocks south of Route 11. It was dedicated by Manassas Moyer. In 1931, an addition was begun, starting in the winter with dedication the following Easter Sunday, 1932, by Andrew S. Bechtel, pastor.

The present church building is located two blocks east of the old church site, designed after a Church of the Brethren structure in Billings, Oklahoma. It was largely constructed by the members themselves and dedicated November 30, 1952.

The congregation has always been district and conference oriented. The distance to the bulk of other Mennonite churches in Oklahoma has made the members feel small and alone. There have been occasional programs with the neighboring sister church in Medford.

Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) has always been able to find

40. *Yearbook of the Deer Creek Mennonite Church*, 1986, p. 2.

41. Miller, "History of the Mennonite Church at Deer Creek."

42. *Blackwell Journal-Tribune*.

43. Miller, "History of the Mennonite Church at Deer Creek."

volunteers in the congregation. Members have served in Gulfport, Mississippi, and Brandenburg and Harlan, Kentucky, after natural disasters struck. The church has hosted the state meeting and Marvin Dester of the congregation has served a number of years as the state MDS secretary. A number of youth have taken part in the MDS Summer Youth Squad. Many youth have served in voluntary service programs. The men of the church have worked at Camp Mennoscah and supported the camp with labor at various times.

Henry Hohmann and several others did work at Cantonment. H. B. Schmidt took youth to Seiling for work projects. The Robert Coons took part in several Indian gatherings. Helen Coon taught Daily Vacation Bible School at Hammon one summer. Offerings have been taken at various times for the Indian work. Wilma and Albert Jantzen, members at Medford who served as missionaries among the Indians, and H. P. Voth kept the church in touch with the Indian missions.

Monthly, except during the summer, the Women's Missionary Association comes together for a program and business. Every Wednesday, women come to the church to quilt. The women have also rolled bandages, made up school kits or Christmas bundles. They have served at sales when needed or brought food to shut-ins or to families who have experienced a death. The group usually sponsors a missionary speaker each year for a special service. Together with the men of the church, they support the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale with items they have made.

The men have been active in many areas of community service such as free chili suppers to men and helping to harvest or plow for persons unable to help themselves. They also have done custom farming to earn money. Some of the men of the church serve on the community volunteer fire department.

The membership and attendance have always matched any of the other churches in town. The church has had cooperative ties with the Methodist church starting back in 1902 with the Bayard Cemetery. Cooperation in an annual Daily Vacation Bible School has gone on with the Christian and Methodist churches for many years. The Christian, Methodist, and Mennonite churches are operating a Cooperative Community Sunday School which includes children up through senior high age.

Women of the church have taken part in community World Day of Prayer services. The Deer Creek-Nardin Ministerial Fellowship, begun by Robert Coon, coordinates the union services, meetings, cantatas, and crusades for five churches of four denominations in the two communities.

The church has been available for other church and community

use. Community wedding showers, a Christian women's exercise group, and denominational committees have occasionally used the building. Women of the church serve meals in the church fellowship hall to the local Lions Club to earn money for local church needs.

There used to be much choral, vocal, and instrumental music in the regular services of the church. This has dwindled considerably due to lack of voices. There used to be much German singing but that is rarely done now. The Sunday school classes are fewer and smaller.

In the 1930s, Christian Endeavor was held every other Sunday. The summer sessions were held in homes. All ages attended and groups met by ages.

In 1952, the new church included a basement where Sunday school classes, socials, quilting, receptions, meetings could now meet comfortably.

The Deer Creek congregation is feeling the loss in number of members due to deaths and moves to other areas. This church's loss in many cases is the gain for the wider church. Elsie Latschar was active as a musician and teacher and many of her piano students are now elsewhere, in other communities and churches as organists, pianists, and choir directors. The same could be said for others.

Church dues were never taken. Giving is on a planned, designated basis for local, district, conference, or other Mennonite causes. The goal has long been a balance between local and wider giving. The sagging rural economy has forced the church to reluctantly alter this ideal somewhat. The giving recently has been averaging over \$500 per capita each year.

Membership on January 1, 1986, was eighty-seven with three associate members.⁴⁴ The members have a prayer for the future. It involves caring about those who come and those who do not come to church. It calls for a revival of spirit, a desire to be more than a place to be married and buried. A better self-image is desired. The older persons hope to be a support to the younger persons and the younger a help to the older by each other's presence.

Herold: a caring country church

Wilma McKee

The Herold Mennonite Church of Bessie, Oklahoma, is located three miles east and four and a half miles north of Cordell, Oklahoma. The church was organized on September 14, 1899. Before this organiza-

44. *Yearbook*, p. 7.



The name Herold was chosen from a post office that later was moved to Bessie: *street scene in 1913.*

tion, however, there is a rich history of amazing experiences which laid the foundation for the Herold church as it exists today.

The early church leaders were of Dutch ancestry and took part in the eighteenth-century migration to West Prussia where they lived for 150 years. They moved to Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century. When special privileges for foreigners in Russia were canceled by Czar Alexander II, a group of 159 Mennonite families followed Claas Epp, a prophetic visionary, to Turkestan. Of the forty-six charter members of the Herold church, thirty-six had been on this journey known as the Great Trek.

They went with great expectations of free land, freedom of religion, and to prepare a place for the returning Lord. After four years of unbelievable hardship, they left Turkestan, disillusioned, and joined others of the Mennonite faith in Nebraska and Kansas. Here they again faced disappointment. The available land had all been taken.⁴⁵

45. Hale, *The Germans from Russia in Oklahoma*; J. Klaassen, "Memories and Notations about My Life," as quoted in G. Watters, "From Russia to Oklahoma: A Case Study of the Immigrant Experience." Masters thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1972, pp. 23-25.

News of free land in the Washita valley of Oklahoma renewed their hope. Two brothers, Michael and Jacob Klaassen, a brother-in-law Peter Quiring, and Peter Horn homesteaded land in the Washita valley in 1894, paying only the ten-dollar filing fee.⁴⁶

Close by, the Bergthal Mennonite Church had organized in August 1884, so for a short time the Klaassens, Quirings, and Horns worshiped with them. At a business meeting in 1896, during an examination of candidates for baptism, differences of opinion arose and brought on a decision to divide the church. Members who had to cross the Washita River also found it difficult to attend church. The division was peaceful, though it took nineteen business meetings for it to become final.⁴⁷

The group west of the Washita which withdrew included the Klaassen, Quiring, and Horn families who now formed the Sichar Mennonite Church with Peter Pankratz as minister. Elder Jacob Toews of Newton helped in the organization. Michael Klaassen was elected minister. Jacob Jantzen and Peter Quiring, both brothers-in-law of Michael and Jacob Klaassen, were chosen as deacons. A church building, twenty-eight feet by forty feet, was built on Jantzen's land, the present Herold church site. By this time eight families from the Trek were there.⁴⁸

In 1898, the Sichar church again suffered from dissension over leadership. As a result, one group excommunicated the other. By resolution, the Sichar church conferred the administration of eldership on the Western District Committee of Church Affairs. This committee composed of elders Christian Krehbiel, Peter Balzer, Jacob Toews, together with J. W. Penner came to Oklahoma for a joint meeting with the two factions. No resolution was found possible. In fact, one group locked the other and the committee out of the church and refused to attend the meeting. Later, Western District minutes related repentance and forgiveness for this action.

With the Conference Committee's help, the Sichar church divided. The northern group took the name Herold Mennonite and bought the church building for \$325 from the Sichar church group. Contentions remained between some members of the churches for many years.⁴⁹ The name Herold was chosen from a post office three miles northwest of the church, which was later moved and became Bessie, Oklahoma.

46. John Arn, *The Herold Mennonite Church, 70th Anniversary, 1899-1969* (North Newton: Mennonite Press, 1969), p. 2.

47. Lloyd C. Penner, "The Mennonites on the Washita River." Ed.D. dissertation, Oklahoma State University, 1976, p. 174.

48. Arn, *Herold Mennonite Church*, p. 3.

49. Minutes of the Kansas Conference of Mennonites, 1877, 1882, and 1899.

The first celebration of the Herold church was a three-hour Christmas Eve program in 1899.⁵⁰

The forty-six charter members of the church were: Franz and Cornelia Schmid Froese; Franz J. and Ann Wedel Froese; Heinrich, Jacob and Maria Froese; Johannes and Louise Toews Fieguth; Johanna and Elisabeth Baerg Gaeddert; David and Heinrich Gaeddert; Peter J. and Justina Klaassen Gaeddert; Peter and Maria Abrahams Horn; Peter F. and Agatha Reimer Horn; Heinrich and Elisabeth Horn; Heinrich and Anna Horn Hinz; Jacob and Helena Klaassen Jantzen; Michael and Margarethe Jantzen Klaassen; Jacob and Katharina Toews Klaassen; Johannes A. Klaassen; Mrs. Aron (Helena Esau) Klaassen; Mrs. Martin (Maria Hamm) Klaassen; Cornelius H. and Elisabeth Nickel Krause; David Henry and Catarina Froese McMichel; Mrs. Heinrich (Helena Harms) Nickel; Gerhard and Aganetha Krause Nickel; Peter A. and Renate Jantzen Quiring; Abraham and Maria Horn Regier; Gerhard Savatzky; and Peter B. and Elisabeth Gaeddert Wedel.⁵¹

In 1902, Herold joined the Western District and, in 1908, the General Conference. In 1904, Jacob Jantzen gave the congregation the land on which the church building stands. In the same year, Jacob Klaassen was ordained to the ministry and the church received its charter of incorporation from the state of Oklahoma. In 1906, the Ladies' Work was organized and in 1912 a Young People's Christian Endeavor program started. By 1909, membership had grown to 126.

A new building was built in 1915 for \$4000. Rock and sand were hauled from the banks of the Washita River. The first musical instrument, a reed organ, was purchased.⁵²

Herold members remember 1917 as a sad year. Because there were no provisions for conscientious objectors, several of their young men went to regular military camp. John Klaassen, son of Michael Klaassen, died from flu in camp and was returned home dressed in the army uniform which he had refused when alive. Because his father removed the uniform and dressed him in a suit for burial, hard feelings were generated in and around Cordell.⁵³

As a result of rumors and threats, Michael Klaassen and family fled to Canada and were soon joined by others until half of the congregation left.⁵⁴ The third minister, Jacob Jantzen, was left in charge, though he was still in training. Mrs. Julius Harms told of

50. Arn, *Herold Mennonite Church*, p. 6.

51. Arn, *Herold Mennonite Church*, pp. 50-51.

52. Arn, *Herold Mennonite Church*., pp. 11-13.

53. See chapter 7.

54. Hale, *Germans from Russia*, pp. 26-27.

that first Sunday morning when Jantzen gave the number of the song for the congregation to sing and walked off stage into a small room. When he returned, obviously deeply moved, he admonished the congregation, though now small in number, to band together in Christian love. He said, "We must not let our church dissolve, but go on preaching the gospel." He promised faithfulness on his part and kept his word by serving as their minister for the next forty years.⁵⁵

Another result of World War I was the closing of two religious schools (Elder Klaassen's school and Flynn German School) due to laws passed in Cordell forbidding the teaching or speaking of German.⁵⁶ (See chapter 7.)

Members of the Herold church heard in 1920 of the terrible plight of their fellow Mennonites still in Russia. They were suffering immense hardship as a result of the Bolsheviks coming into power and the Civil War which followed. The church collected money and, in the following year, 280 pounds of clothing to be sent to Russia. Theirs was one of the early efforts which led to the establishment of the Mennonite Central Committee. Interest in supporting relief work has been a continuing one.⁵⁷

In 1905, some members of the Herold church left the church and started a Mennonite Brethren church one-half mile away. Land was donated for the church and cemetery by a former Herold member. The church building has since been moved to Cordell and is the present Bible Mennonite Brethren Church. The cemetery remains. Differences dating back to Mennonite communities in Russia are thought to have played a part in this division.⁵⁸

The 1940s were a period of transition and change for the church. With the resignation of Jantzen as minister, an outside minister, John R. Duerksen, was elected and for the first time the minister was paid. He served from 1940 to 1943. Preaching and singing was in English. American and Christian flags were placed in the front of the sanctuary, and, in 1943, women were permitted to come to the annual business meetings. In 1944, a basement was dug under the church after fourteen years of deliberation.

Cornelius B. Friesen was pastor from 1943 to 1946 and Paul W. Dahlenburg from 1946 to 1951. By this time, English was used exclusively. A constitution which had been written in 1944 was accepted in 1948. In 1946, work was done on the church basement and,

55. History Committee of Herold Mennonite Church: Otto Nickel, Leonard Harms, and John Sprunger (pastor).

56. Arn, *Herold Mennonite Church*, p. 17.

57. Arn, *Herold Mennonite Church*, p. 17.

58. History Committee.

in 1951, a parsonage was purchased in Cordell. Richard Tschetter became pastor in 1951 and served until 1961, with C. B. Friesen serving again from 1962 to 1965.⁵⁹

In 1965, John Arn became pastor and a year later the men organized into a brotherhood. In 1969, when the church celebrated its seventieth anniversary, Arn wrote and published a history, *The Herold Mennonite Church-70th Anniversary*.

From 1975 to 1982, Robert Coon was pastor of the church. During this time, the new Sunday school wing was added and the basement was remodeled. This project was paid for by the time it was finished.⁶⁰

In 1983, John Sprunger, the present minister, began his work in the Herold church. In his second year, a drive-in ministry was started, once a month during the spring and summer. The porch of the church serves as a platform for these informal services of music and devotional messages.

Witness in the Herold church has been primarily through Sunday school and personal lifestyle. Since 1927, special evangelistic meetings have been a part of the church program. In 1951, annual mission festivals were added.

Herold church has been involved with Indian missions only in a general way. They have given special programs to Indian churches and in turn were invited to a Christian Indian powwow at Colony, Oklahoma. The congregation cooperates with the Mennonite Brethren church in a variety of ways such as hymn sings and special meetings.

Seven men have been ordained in the church since its beginning: Michael Klaassen, Jacob Klaassen, Jacob Jantzen, Ernest Baergen, Richard Tschetter, Norman Schmidt, and Harold Jantzen. A number of others have served in various areas such as mission work, PAX, and Teachers Abroad Program (TAP) service.

The Herold Mennonite Church is no longer an isolated church. Most changes have come from education and mingling with the surrounding culture. The church of 134 members emphasizes basic gospel truths and seeks to continue to be a "country church with a caring heart." This is demonstrated best by the membership in specific acts of compassion in times of need.

59. Arn, *Herold Mennonite Church*, p. 20.

60. History Committee.

Hydro: forming a church family

Wilma McKee

In 1901 and 1902, fifteen Mennonite families settled eight and a half miles southeast of Hydro, Oklahoma.⁶¹ The town was located by the government in August 1901. It was first called Caddo and then changed to Hydro because of the abundance of pure water. This good water was one of the things that drew the Mennonite farmers to settle in the area. The absence of Indian allotments and government and military reservations was also regarded as favorable.⁶²

The land was level prairie interrupted by small mountains, which appealed to the Mennonites from Nebraska and Kansas. Some families got their land through lotteries and others bought land from early settlers who wanted to move on. The area settled ranged about fourteen miles east and west and five miles north and south.

The original fifteen families came from varied backgrounds—Poland, the Low Countries, and West Prussia—to settle in Kansas and Nebraska. As land became scarce, they looked once again for *Lebensraum* (room to live). Coming from different communities, they brought with them traditions and disputes which remained strong even in their new homes. They also had in common a strong bond forged by a deep faith, a love and respect for the land, an appreciation for the German language, and an eagerness for new adventure.⁶³

Included in these early families were David F. and Elizabeth Durksen Hiebert and Gerhard and Anna Brandt Dick from the Bethesda Mennonite Church, Henderson, Nebraska; Jacob P. and Katharine Janzen from Hoffnungsau, Buhler, Kansas; Jacob Warkentin, Inman, Kansas; John and Katherine Ediger, Henry and Anna Goertz, Peter and John Funk, Henry Peters, Jacob Graves and family, George Wiens and family, and the Bernard and Cornelius Wiebe families, all from Kansas. Abraham S. and Helena Hinz Heidebrecht came from the Oklahoma Mennonite Mission at Shelly. Others were Jacob A. and Margaret Klassen Pankratz, Hillsboro, Kansas, and John K. and Marie Fedrau Warkentin, Inman, Kansas.

In the fall of 1902, J. S. Krehbiel, Geary, Oklahoma, read a letter to the annual Oklahoma Convention from Bernard Wiebe, asking for help to organize their families into a church.⁶⁴ By 1903, these fami-

61. *Seventy-fifth Anniversary History of the Bethel Mennonite Church, Hydro, Oklahoma*, 1981, p. 2.

62. Ethel Armstrong and Evelynne Alvin, *Hydro Heritage*, quoted from *Hydro Review*, first edition, 1901, pp. 3-4.

63. *Seventy-fifth Anniversary History*, pp. 2-3.

64. Oklahoma Convention minutes, 1902.

lies were worshiping together in homes. Two additional families came from the Emmaus Church, Whitewater, Kansas: John and Justine Claassen Entz and Peter and Anna Riesen Nachtigall. Peter Nachtigalls had been a part of the Great Trek to Turkestan.

In early 1904, permission was given by the board of the Mound School for the Mennonites to use their building on Sundays. By fall, twenty-five families made plans to build a permanent place of worship.

The new building was wood framed, twenty-eight feet wide and forty feet long. It was built at a cost of \$400 on two acres of the John Entz farm, eight and a half miles southeast of Hydro and was named the First Mennonite Church of Caddo County. The first furniture consisted of homemade benches, communion table, and a small pulpit.

Gerhard Dick and Bernard Wiebe were the first elected pastors of the church. Dick was a school teacher from Russia who spoke four languages. Wiebe came to Oklahoma from the Emmaus Mennonite Church at Whitewater, Kansas.

By 1906, the Western District Conference minutes mention differences which caused Wiebe and Dick to feel they could not work together in the same church with blessing and success. A majority of church members agreed with this decision, resulting in one group choosing Dick as their pastor and returning to the schoolhouse to worship under the name of Bethel Mennonite. The remaining group under Wiebe continued to worship in the church building using the name First Mennonite. Both churches felt they could belong to the Western District Conference and mutually accept one another.⁶⁵

A formal agreement to organize, dated July 10, 1906, was signed by charter members of Bethel Mennonite: Bernard Thiessen Sr., Jacob P. Janzen, John K. Warkentin, David Hiebert, Jacob Ediger, Jacob A. Pankratz, Peter Nachtigall, and Henry Goertz. There were twenty-one members and forty children on the roll. Their first annual meeting, recorded on January 5, 1907, mentions receiving \$200 from the First Mennonite church for their share of the building.⁶⁶

Within a few years, members of First Mennonite began to move away. Their minister, Bernard Wiebe, returned to Whitewater, Kansas, to become pastor of the Emmaus Church. By 1910, only a few families remained and the two churches merged, moving back into the church building and retaining the name Bethel Mennonite.

In 1910, Bethel Mennonite applied for membership to Western District Conference and was accepted. However, former First Menno-

65. Western District minutes, 1906, p. 13.

66. Church record book, Bethel Mennonite Church, 1906-1919.

nite members felt they were owed \$250 for the church building. They in turn owed money to Bethel Mennonite members. The Western District Committee of Church Affairs helped in regulating the matter and it was cleared up in 1913.⁶⁷

In addition to ministers elected from the church membership, elders J. S. Krehbiel and later Henry Riesen from the First Mennonite Church, Geary, Oklahoma, came to baptize and serve the Lord's Supper. Christian Ramseier, Orienta, Oklahoma, came in the early years as a visiting minister for the Western District Conference.⁶⁸

When Dick resigned in 1914, the church had forty-one members and fifty-six children. From 1914 to 1917, the Home Mission Committee sent traveling ministers to the church, who in turn sent an offering to the committee. In 1917, Peter Nachtigall became minister and the constitution which had been written in 1907 was formally accepted.

Many early members moved away, some because of other land becoming available, some because of crop failures. Life in frontier Oklahoma brought many hardships. Of the fifteen original families, only Jacob A. Pankratz and Abraham Heidebrecht remained at Bethel Mennonite. The children of the Gerhard Dick and Jacob P. Janzen families married and remained after their parents moved away. The John Ediger and Henry Goertz families moved to the Oklahoma Mennonite communities of Berghal, near Corn, and Medford. All others returned to former or new communities in Nebraska and Kansas. The turnover in membership added to the strain on the new church.

In 1926, Nachtigall resigned because of the change to the English language and in 1928 Henry Funk became the first paid, ordained minister. He served until 1943.

It was during the eleven years of the ministry of Waldo and Ethel Kaufman of Pretty Prairie, Kansas, that a parsonage was purchased and the church building refurnished. By 1956, when the church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, there were fifty-eight members and seventeen children. Church pastors from 1956 on were: Paul and Beryl Isaak, Vernon and Luella Lohrentz, B. H. and Catherine Janzen, Larry and Jane Wilson, Arnold and Tina Epp, Grant and Verna Noll, Ralph and Mary Graber as interim, and Lyman and Adeline Sprunger as interim.

In 1963, the congregation built a new building in Hydro at a cost of \$31,000. The old building was sold and moved; the cemetery remains on the grounds. A new parsonage was built in Hydro in 1974.

67. Western District minutes, 1913, p. 18.

68. Western District minutes, 1906, p. 7.

Since its beginning, the Bethel Mennonite Church has supported the Oklahoma Convention, giving special effort to the retreat program whose grounds have been located in Hydro since 1945.

Since 1956, members have served on Western District committees. From the 1960s, most youth have served in some form of voluntary service ranging from work in other states to local retreats. From 1966 until the present, Herman and Ruth Buller and family have served as missionaries in Tshikapa, Zaire. Active service is given to Mennonite Central Committee, especially in meat canning, disaster service, and the Et Cetera Shop at Weatherford.

In 1914, the church felt the tensions caused by a movement of nondenominational groups formed by people who left established churches to form their own fellowships. Bethel church lost seven members and three children to this movement.

The 1980s brought a new enthusiasm and direction. Sol-N-Amor (Serving Oklahoma Laborers in Love), a work with local churches of several denominations, was started among undocumented Mexican workers. Soon after the church celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1981, German Sunday school and English classes were started for General Conference Mennonite families who moved to the community from Mexico. In 1982, the Bethel church together with the neighboring Mennonite Church (Pleasant View) purchased the Maple Lawn Manor Nursing Home.

At present, Bethel is home to seventy-five members and twenty-four children. In addition, a number of German Mennonite families and their children attend. In September 1985, Abe and Ruby Krause began their ministry at Bethel.

There has been, since 1906, a gradual molding into a church family which has required experiences of forgiveness and mercy from God and between members. A genuine, binding love is shown in care for the ill and aged, and in sharing both tragedies and joys. There is a commitment to a witness which uses the gifts of young and old alike and stresses equally word and deed.

Turpin: in the field of peace

Robert R. Coon

The Turpin Mennonite Church building is located in the country in the midst of its members. Four miles north and four miles east of Turpin, in Beaver County of the Oklahoma Panhandle, the congregation carries on an active program. It has a number of younger and

older families who farm and work in the area.⁶⁹

The dry, windy high plains of the Oklahoma Panhandle attracted Mennonite families just after the turn of the century because the government offered land. Mennonite settlers began to come into the panhandle in 1903, followed by others over the next three years.

Near Turpin, the Friedensfeld (field of peace) Mennonite Church was formed and grew as a witness. This was the original name of the congregation, changed in 1965 to Turpin Mennonite Church.

Some came by wagon to explore the land. The report they gave back home was that the land was good, but that it never rained. P. M. Franz's grandfather said, "No, but if people move up there to live, God will send the necessary rain."⁷⁰ More settlers came, mainly from the central Kansas area, many from the Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church near Inman, Kansas.

Those first years little rain fell. Crop failures and poor crops were many. One family packed up, ready to leave the next morning. That night a good rain fell and they stayed. The settlers discovered, however, that they had a good supply of well water from below. The aquifer water was pure enough to put into car batteries. P. M. Franz commented on the Lord's provision of needed moisture by saying, "And so it has been, as we well know."⁷¹

The families first met in their homes for Sunday school and worship services. These were then moved to a dugout school one mile north of the Mennonite cemetery. The cemetery is one and a half miles east of the present church location. At first, only Sunday school classes were held. Then sermons were read. Following this, the need for preaching services was felt. Finally, a devotional hour was held by one person on a Sunday, and the following Sunday someone would read a sermon. Isaac M. Wiens from the Peters Church often took part in such services.

In 1906, H. R. Voth, under the Western District Home Mission Committee's direction, came to meet with the families. Voth was present at the meeting on June 30, 1907, when the families formally organized as a congregation with twenty-one charter members.

The congregation affiliated with the Western District in 1907 and joined the General Conference in 1908.

The first church building was started in 1908 on an acre of land donated by George Epp, a charter member. The church still owns

69. Committee members from the church who helped in this church's history were: Aldo and Mary Ann Becker; Paul and Sara Ediger; and Franzie and Leona Loepp.

70. P. M. Franz, "The History of Turpin Mennonite Church 1907-1975." Unpublished paper, p. 1.

71. Franz, "History."

that original land. Money was borrowed from the Hoffnungsau congregation for the project. A neighbor and nonmember, William Frank, laid the foundation for the church building and showed the members how to install the rafters. The church building was consecrated on January 17, 1909. An addition was added later. Still later, this building became so crowded that the congregation decided upon larger quarters.

In 1939, a selected building committee located an unused Methodist church building northeast of the Greenough schoolhouse and bought it. By the spring of 1940, the roads were dry enough to move this building to a site one-fourth mile east of the first church on land donated by John T. Dirks, a charter member. The new church building was dedicated at a harvest festival, October 6-13, 1940.

In 1966, a third building was erected on the same site. Part of the second church was used to build the third building. Dedication was April 16, 1967.

The first minister of the church was Jacob Dirks, one of the farmer settlers. He was ordained as preacher on November 10, 1907. He was the first and only pastor chosen from within the congregation. With his family, he moved back to the Buhler area in 1917.

Gerhard Friesen came in 1919 and served until 1922. The church was without a regular minister for all or part of the period from 1922 to 1925. Ed Duerksen was pastor from 1925 to 1926. Other pastors who served at Turpin were B. H. Janzen (1926-29), Rudolph Schmidt (1931-40), Abram Albrecht served six months during the period from 1940 to 1942, Marvin Eck (1942-43), Bethel College students (1943-48), John G. Unruh (1948-51), Levi H. Koehn (1951-60), Menno Ediger was interim pastor September 1954-May 1955, Peter Retzlaff (1961-64), Menno Ediger (1964-66), Kenneth Rupp (1966-70), Willard Stucky (1971-74), David Braun (1974-77), Robert Dalke (1977-86)⁷² and Robert R. Coon (1986-present). Willard Stucky and David Braun served a two point charge which included Turpin and the Calvary Mennonite Church, Liberal, Kansas.

Charter members of the congregation were Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Dirks; Mr. and Mrs. Klaas Fransen; Mr. and Mrs. David Boese; Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Epp; Mr. and Mrs. John T. Dirks; Mr. and Mrs. A. T. Dirks; Mr. and Mrs. George Epp; Mr. and Mrs. Peter H. Boese; Mr. and Mrs. Henry Zielke; Mr. and Mrs. H. H. Goertzen; and Mr. Jake Ratzlaff.⁷³

72. Seventy-fifth Anniversary Program Bulletin, October 17, 1982, Robert Dalke pastor at the time, Turpin Mennonite Church.

73. *75 Years of Sowing and Reaping*, newsletter of the seventy-fifth anniversary, Turpin Mennonite Church, no author given, no date, p. 4.

Nearly all the charter members came to the United States from Russia. Next they came to Oklahoma from Kansas to claim the land that the government was offering. Some persons or families moved to California during the dust bowl days, others returned to Kansas. Some moved to nearby communities to find work. Some stayed because they were too poor to do anything else.

The congregation has many who have served in Civilian Public Service, alternate service (I-W), and PAX. There is at least one from the congregation in U.S. mission work and another in overseas long-term mission work. Many have been and still are active in Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) activities. A number of youth go out every summer with the MDS Oklahoma youth squad. Many have been in voluntary service. The church has sponsored several youth to visit Thailand to see Christian service work there.

One Indian pastor, Homer Hart, was here for several mission festivals. Several women spent time working with the Arizona Indians in voluntary service. Quilt blocks have been sent to Indian stations, and labels have been saved for the Hopi Mission School.

The Women's Missionary Society was strong and active for many years. It is now smaller but still functioning. The Cheerful Workers, a younger women's group, plans special projects and events. A Men's Brotherhood provides service to the church. A youth group, choirs, special music, song leaders, pianists, and organists add to the church life. Christian education is important.

The congregation has for many years held a combined Daily Vacation Bible School with the nearby Bethel Church of God. In the Turpin area, there have been union services, cantatas, a community World Day of Prayer, an interdenominational Bible study and ministerial cooperation among four churches. Several women from the church sing in an interdenominational Christian women's ensemble.

In nearby Liberal, Kansas, the congregation, along with other area Mennonite churches, is active in operating the Et Cetera Shop and helping to sponsor Mennonite Central Committee international exchange visitors. The church had shared an interest in the operation of a day-care center in Liberal, the Sunshine Center, which included a voluntary service unit. The center closed in late 1986. The church provides food and financial aid for the Liberal Food Cupboard, an interdenominational emergency service. Pastors of the church have cooperated with the Liberal Ministerial Alliance.

In earlier years, dues were paid by members for janitor work and utility payments. This has been discontinued. The giving pattern has been half local and half for other causes. The church supports Western District and General Conference work and other causes previously mentioned. It also supports MCC/CROP. Offerings for

fixed causes are taken each Sunday, the schedule determined at the annual business meeting.

Changes in the Turpin Mennonite Church during the past fifty years have been in the communion services and in many interdenominational and inter-Mennonite marriages. Some of these partners have become quite active. Several from the area have joined the church.

An issue facing the church today is persons moving away, some to find work, some going to retirement communities. There is also concern over lack of attendance of younger persons at Sunday evening meetings. Some are concerned for future survival.

The congregation, whose membership in 1987 was ninety-seven, feels its greatest strength in spiritual growth has been in helping families to be nurtured in Christian ways and helping in the spiritual nurture of children.

The basic Mennonite belief that the church stresses is concern for one another. Prayer is important with a prayer chain in operation at times and a women's prayer group started. Turpin Mennonite Church is a country church within the wider community and with worldwide concerns. Caring is at its heart.

Greenfield: struggle blended with faith

Wilma McKee

The Greenfield Mennonite Church forms the southern border of the Oklahoma General Conference churches. It is located thirteen miles southeast of Carnegie.

The founding families came from Cardswell, Russia, to Ohio in 1874, and then moved to Moundridge, Kansas, where they experienced extremely hard times. One family's house burned, the crops were poor, and prices were low. At one time, corn was cheaper than coal, and corn stalks and cow chips were used for fuel. Food was scarce, often one meal a day, but compared to Russia where there was sometimes no food for several days, it could be endured.⁷⁴

In 1892, several families moved to Paul's Valley in Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory, where they lived in log cabins. One of the men, Pete Base, served as their preacher.⁷⁵ They were able to raise good gardens here but on the whole finances were worse and they

74. Melvin A. Jones, *The Bohse Family History* (Lincoln, Neb., 1958). Unpublished family history, p. 9.

75. Jones, *Bohse Family*, p. 11. (The name was changed to this spelling.)

became the “poorest of the poor.” So, in 1903, they decided to move to Ft. Cobb, Oklahoma. Some settled south of Carnegie, some south of Ft. Cobb, and others in between. Here they paid \$100 per acre for their land and were required to build a three-room house on it.⁷⁶ One family, Henry H. and Anna Unruh, came in the middle of December and immediately prepared a dugout which they covered with canvas from their wagon to protect the family. They were astonished to wake in the morning and find everything covered with snow.⁷⁷

Church services were first held in homes, then in the Spring Valley school and later in Neola school. Because of complaints from the outside community about their use of the school, they began to meet in homes again. This continued for a total of twelve years under the combined ministry of Henry Riesen and Fred Stucky of Ebenezer Mennonite Church, Gotebo, and Michael Klaassen, Herold Mennonite, Bessie. H. R. Voth visited during this time for the Conference and Henry Riesen was their first elected elder. When the work became too heavy for this ministerial team, combined with their own churches, A. W. Froese of Taloga, Oklahoma, came to help.⁷⁸

In 1914, this fellowship of ten families hired an Indian man, John Maxen, who was noted in the community as a fine carpenter, to build a church building. One of the group, John B. Jantz, gave one acre of land. Formal organization of the church was on January 31, 1914. Charter members were: John B. and Elizabeth Jantz, Henry H. and Anna Unruh, John G. and Elizabeth Schmidt, Henry B. and Susana Base, Adam and Helena Nightingale, Henry and Eva Koehn, Isaac and Maggie Base, Peter J. and Mary Schmidt, Henry and Elizabeth Jantz, and Henry J. and Minnie Schmidt.⁷⁹

As the church took a physical and spiritual shape, members discussed what it should be named. Mrs. Henry (Elizabeth) Jantz pointed to the wheat fields surrounding the church house and said, “Look all around. How green everything is! Let’s call it Greenfield (*Grünfeld*).” And so it was agreed.⁸⁰

In February 1915, A. W. Froese accepted the church’s call as full-time minister. Froese did not have a formal education, but he served the Greenfield congregation for thirty-five years. He was not paid a salary, but was provided a place to live and the members paid \$200

76. Jones, *Bohse Family*, p. 16.

77. Mrs. LaVern Unruh, Mrs. Leo Nightingale, Mrs. Alvin Unruh, interviews with Greenfield Mennonite Church History Committee.

78. First church record book of Greenfield Mennonite Church, Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA).

79. First church record book.

80. Unruh, Nightingale, and Unruh interview.

for his farm lease.⁸¹

In these early years, making a living was all important. While a few children attended English school in Ft. Cobb, most of the members shied away from the rest of the community. They clustered together as if to shield themselves from harsh realities. In part, this may have been because they had experienced discomfort with the community when meeting in the Neola school, partly it was language difficulty.

In 1918, a cemetery was added west of the church. John B. Jantz sold the plot to the church for \$100. A new church building was built in 1928. The old one was bought by a member and moved northwest of the church site. The family who bought it used it as a home. Later it was moved to Carnegie, where it is still in use.⁸²

Trouble came in about 1932 when a tent minister was allowed to speak in the church. When the church leaders disagreed with his beliefs and refused to let him continue speaking, he went to individual homes of members and worked at persuading them to follow him in beginning a non-denominational church. Three families withdrew from Greenfield because of this. The new group met in homes and a schoolhouse for a while but finally disintegrated. The minister quit the ministry and left the area. One family rejoined the Greenfield church, one moved away, and one joined a Nazarene church in Carnegie.⁸³

Another change in the 1930s concerned language. German school stopped, but German preaching continued. Members felt their youth were losing out on the sermons. Because Froese was unable to preach in English, the church board felt his service should be terminated.⁸⁴ After the church celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1939, Froese was asked to leave, but he was reluctant to do so and friction resulted. The Western District Conference Committee for Church Affairs helped in resolving the difficulties between church and pastor.

After Froese left, interim pastors served until Rudolph Schmidt came and served from 1941 to 1947. Current members speak of this time as the golden age of Greenfield church. Many changes occurred: English was used exclusively, a women's work was started, a thirty-seven-member choir organized, Daily Vacation Bible School started, and married couples began to sit together in church. Membership

81. Unruh, Nightingale, and Unruh interview.

82. Unruh, Nightingale, and Unruh interview.

83. Unruh, Nightingale, and Unruh interview.

84. Letter from A. W. Froese to Greenfield congregation (in church record book), July 10, 1933.

grew to 107 with many youth and children attending.⁸⁵

From 1947 to 1952, the church was served by Curt Boese. During this time, social changes such as a ball team for the youth caused some tensions with the older members who were not sure the minister should promote this type of activity.⁸⁶ The Western District Home Mission Committee helped work out the problems.⁸⁷

Other ministers who served were: Ben Friesen (1952-54), Jacob Krause (1954-60), Rudolph Schmidt for a second term (1960-65), and Albert Schmidt as part-time resident pastor (1965-69). Interim pastors Henry Hege, Harold Janzen, Norman Dalke, and C. B. Friesen helped the church between ministers. Besides these pastors, students from Bethel College served and W. F. Unruh, former field secretary for the Western District, served the church on many occasions.⁸⁸ Records show clearly that this southernmost Oklahoma church was not forgotten by the Western District Conference. Mrs. Dedan Unruh, correspondent for the *Mennonite Weekly Review*, writing the story of the church's fiftieth anniversary celebration on September 1, 1963, said, "The Home Mission Board of the Conference has done a wonderful work here in helping with the pastor's support."⁸⁹

In 1947 an old farmhouse was torn down by church members, young and old alike, and a ladies' missionary house was built from the lumber, on the church grounds. A parsonage was purchased in 1951. It was relocated to the church grounds and remodeled in 1960.

The Greenfield church produced two ministers: Clifford Koehn and Norman Dalke. Others have served in various ways, with loyalty and interest shown especially to Oklahoma retreats, meat canning for Mennonite Central Committee, and Bible school.

Average membership in 1964 was forty-eight. Decline in numbers hit this rural church as land became scarce, industry was nonexistent, and jobs were not available. The youth began to leave and as membership dwindled, a full-time pastor seemed impossible to support. Faced with adversity, the strength of remaining faithful members seemed to come forth. After all, theirs is a heritage which blends struggle and faith. Their decision to be more than a Sunday school meant taking responsibility. In 1969, they organized the ten attend-

85. Letter from Dedan Unruh, Montezuma, Kansas (former church secretary at Greenfield).

86. Unruh, Nightingale, and Unruh interview.

87. Minutes of the Home Mission Committee of the Western District Conference, April 11, 1950.

88. Present church record book of Greenfield congregation.

89. Mrs. Dedan Unruh, "Greenfield's 50th Anniversary Celebration News," *Mennonite Weekly Review*.

ing families into a lay ministry. Each family prepares and serves a worship service as their turn comes.⁹⁰ At present there are twenty-eight, including children, attending.

Clifford Koehn, pastor of the First Mennonite Church, Geary, serves the church two Sunday evenings a month. He also performs baptisms and serves communion.

Greenfield is still a rural church, dedicated to their mission which is service oriented. They are disturbed that they remain in a sense a loner from the community. They hunger for a resident pastor who will help them find challenge in their continuing service to God.

Eden: tried by fire

Dean Kroeker

Some years before 1912, families in Kansas began to look to other places to live due to overpopulation and the drought in their areas in Kansas.

Nicholas J. Hiebert read in the *Bundesbote* about land that was available in northeast Oklahoma. Several families moved to the area over the next few years. The N. J. Hieberts came from the Bruderthal congregation near Hillsboro, Kansas. The P. J. Rempels also came from the Bruderthal community. Mrs. Rempel had been a member of the Alexanderwohl church near Goessel, Kansas, before her marriage. The Abe Ennses came from the Blumenfeld community near Goessel, Kansas, the Henry Pankratzes were from Avard, Oklahoma. The Heinrich Jantzens, G. B. Regiers, and G. J. Voths came from the Ebenflur congregation in Hamilton County, Kansas. The H. G. Kroekers came from the Hoffnungsau Mennonite congregation near Inman, Kansas.⁹¹

In 1912, these families started a Sunday school in the farm homes of the Hieberts and Rempels near Inola, Oklahoma. There were two Sunday school classes; the adult class was taught by Peter Rempel and the children's was taught by Mrs. N. J. Hiebert. Occasionally they had special services using the Gregory school building a few miles west of Inola as a meeting place. Some families traveled by horse and buggy from Adair, Oklahoma, a distance of over twenty-five miles.⁹²

90. Dedan Unruh letter.

91. Interview with John J. and Ella (Rempel) Voth and Waldo and Agatha (Froese) Funk, spring 1987.

92. George B. Regier, "History of the Eden Mennonite Church," *50th Anniversary of the Eden Mennonite Church* (1964), pp. 7-9.

In 1914, Hiebert and Rempel each paid \$50 to purchase a school house which was moved onto property donated to the church by Henry Pankratz. The church was formally organized on November 12, 1914, as the Eden Mennonite Church. The school building was moved using two wagons and coupling poles and was pulled along by teams of horses, a distance of at least ten miles from the school's location to the church property.⁹³

The charter members numbered thirty-one. They were: Mr. and Mrs. N. J. Hiebert; Mr. and Mrs. P. J. Rempel; Mr. and Mrs. Herman P. Jantzen; Mr. and Mrs. G. J. Voth; Mr. and Mrs. Heinrich Jantzen, Sr.; Mr. and Mrs. Adolf Miller; Mr. and Mrs. G. Martin; Mr. and Mrs. Abe Enns; Mr. and Mrs. Ferd Jantz; Mr. and Mrs. Henry Pankratz; Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Kroeker; Mr. and Mrs. George B. Regier; Mrs. Solomon Mouttet; Mrs. John Baergen; Bill Hiebert; Heinrich Friesen; Anna Janzen; and Mr. and Mrs. Henry Jantzen, Jr.⁹⁴

Other early settlers were the Abraham Funks who came from near Goessel, Kansas. The Henry and Jacob Froeses moved to the Inola area in 1916. The Paul Loewen family moved here from Fairview, Oklahoma. There was a Hiebert and a Richert family east of Pryor, Oklahoma, as well as the George Reimers whose house stood on the opposite side of the road from their barn. The barn is still standing. There was the Henry Ruth family that lived west of Adair who moved onto a farm east of the church. They joined the Eden church in the early 1920s.⁹⁵

In 1915, the Eden Church joined the General Conference. The first pastor was Herman Jantzen from Stanton County, Kansas. He served from June 25, 1916, to April 1919 when he returned to Kansas due to the severe heat in Oklahoma. Prior to Jantzen's installation, sermons had been read by various members of the church.⁹⁶

On September 3, 1916, Solomon Mouttet was elected to share in the ministry, assisting Jantzen. Mouttet had been a student at Bethel College but did not agree totally with its teaching.⁹⁷

Because the Mennonite families spoke the German language and German was used in their church services, the community misunderstood them and accused them of being loyal to the Kaiser of Germany. Some of the older members feel now that some of this might have been averted had they been more open in sharing their faith at that

93. Voth and Funk interview.

94. Regier, *50th Anniversary*, p. 7.

95. Voth and Funk interview; Franklin Plett, "The Sunday School," *50th Anniversary*, p. 10.

96. *50th Anniversary*; interview with Art and Frieda (Regier) Unrau, spring 1986.

97. *50th Anniversary*, p. 7.

time. Nevertheless, it caused suffering and loss of property.⁹⁸

One Sunday afternoon in 1918, fire destroyed the Eden church. Rumor was that someone had been paid five dollars to set the church ablaze. This hard blow to the new congregation did not cause its faith to falter. After the fire, services were held about one and a half miles east of the church in a newly built barn belonging to G. J. Voth. It was in this barn that John Funk, Jake Martins, and Art Hiebert were baptized by H. R. Voth. But two months later, the Voth barn, as well as the Mennonite Brethren church in Inola, were also destroyed by fire. In recent years a confession was made concerning the burning of the church and forgiveness was sought. The name of the person was not made public.⁹⁹

During this time, the buying of war bonds was stressed. One man was taken away from his family one night, accused of being a slacker, and his home painted yellow. Upon his return a few days later, he was carrying war bonds and had Red Cross buttons in his pocket. Another man was threatened with being tarred and feathered. As a result, he left the community. After G. J. Voth's barn was burned, the church was given permission to meet in the Highway schoolhouse. They were told that the school would not be burned because they had a U.S. flag on display.¹⁰⁰

John J. Voth tells how he had seen an affidavit with signatures of individuals who had pledged to do their part in preventing any further settlement of Germans in their community. The people on this list were known as the German haters. Mr. Voth was treasurer for the collection of Peace Bonds issued by the Conference at this time.

When Jantzen returned to Kansas, Solomon Mouttet was chosen by lot for the leadership of the church. On August 30, 1919, the congregation decided to build a new house of worship, twenty-eight feet wide, forty feet long, with a fourteen-foot ceiling. Money was contributed not only by local members but by friends and churches in Kansas. Dedication services, led by John Lichti, were held in the summer of 1920. At this time, Lichti ordained G. B. Regier as an evangelist. Regier had taken some training at the *Gemeinde Schule* in Inman, Kansas. His formal educational training had taken him through the fourth grade.¹⁰¹ A U.S. flag and a Christian flag were placed in the front of the church at this dedication and they remained there until 1986 when a new sanctuary was constructed.¹⁰²

98. Voth and Funk interview; Unrau interview.

99. Voth and Funk interview; Unrau interview.

100. Voth and Funk interview; Unrau interview.

101. Unrau interview.

102. Voth and Funk interview.

Moultet served the church until December 17, 1925, leaving to go to the church at Kingman, Kansas. The leadership then fell on G. B. Regier. In December 1931, Moultet and his family returned to the Inola community and began once more to serve the church as its elder. He served until the work of the Go Ye Mission had grown to such an extent that his full time was needed.¹⁰³

Underlying differences during these early days were related to the assurance of one's salvation. One faction thought that assurance was not to be taught and the other felt that assurance came through the daily living out of one's faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁴

In 1945, the G. B. Regier family moved to Medford, Oklahoma, but returned the following year to the farm near Inola. He began serving the church as minister on November 7, 1946. He was ordained as elder by J. M. Regier on May 16, 1948, and served the church until 1954 when he retired.¹⁰⁵

In 1950, the church decided to build an addition onto the north side of the church. The addition was thirty by thirty-two feet with a basement. Groundbreaking was held on August 20, 1950, with G. B. Regier in charge. Dedication followed on January 14, 1954; Philip Wedel was the guest speaker.¹⁰⁶

Homer Sperling was called to serve as pastor in 1954 and served until 1957 when he resigned and left during a Sunday morning worship service. G. B. Regier then again served until 1959 when Abe Krause was called and installed as pastor in August of that year. This was Krause's first pastorate after his graduation from seminary.

In 1964, a decision was made for further building improvements. The sanctuary was to be remodeled, moving the main entrance to the south. An educational wing measuring thirty by fifty feet with a basement was planned for the east side. Groundbreaking occurred on June 14, 1964, and the dedication was held on November 15, 1964. Elmer Friesen, North Newton, Kansas, Western District Conference Minister, gave the dedicatory message.¹⁰⁷

In August 1965, Abe Krause resigned as pastor. E. A. Albrecht took his place. Albrecht retired in 1974 and Levi Koehn became the pastor on May 4, 1975. During the Koehns' time in our church, they underwent much physical illness. After a long illness with cancer, Lillian Koehn died on July 14, 1980. After her death, Koehn never experienced good health again. He resigned in 1981 and retired to Goessel,

103. Regier, *50th Anniversary*, p. 8.

104. Interview with a group of senior church members.

105. Regier, *50th Anniversary*, p. 8.

106. Regier, *50th Anniversary*, pp. 8-9.

107. Regier, *50th Anniversary*, p. 9.

Kansas.¹⁰⁸

Following Koehn's resignation, the church was without a pastor for over one year during which time the pulpit was filled by pastors from the Conference under the arrangements of the Western District. It was during this time that lay people learned to take charge, and even though the times seemed rough, the Lord granted peace and strength to carry on. The church grew spiritually through the experience. In the summer of 1982, John Miller from the Dallas Fellowship became interim pastor and through his leadership the idea of a new sanctuary was born. At a time when the church felt it needed to rest, Miller showed how the church needed to plan for its future.

In December 1982, Earl Cater was ordained as the minister. He and his wife Erma, and their three girls moved into the parsonage at Christmastime. It soon became evident that the parsonage was too small and Pastor Cater built a home of his own. The parsonage in Chouteau was sold and the profits were put into the church building fund for the new sanctuary.

Construction began on October 14, 1985, and the new sanctuary, renovated classrooms, and fellowship hall were dedicated on Pentecost Sunday, 1986. In September of that same year, the church was host to the Oklahoma Convention. The church has been experiencing a great growth in attendance on Sunday mornings, going from an average of 92 in 1981 to 147 in 1986. In 1986 alone, twenty-two new members were added to the church by way of transfer of church letter and baptism.¹⁰⁹

Grace: reaching outside their family

Robert R. Coon

In March 1935, the Western District took action to organize a mission church in Enid, Oklahoma, which was called the Enid Mennonite Mission.

The congregation had an earlier beginning. In 1895, John Penner of Nebraska found a Mennonite family in the Enid area, a Mr. and Mrs. C. Dalke, attending a Lutheran church. In 1900, more Mennonite families moved to Enid and services were begun.¹¹⁰ But it was not until 1934 that the Western District Conference Home Mission Com-

108. Personal diary entry of Ella Voth.

109. Selected year books, Eden Mennonite Church.

110. Haurly, *Prairie People*, pp. 134, 266. Committee members from the church who helped in this church's history: Myrtle Becker, Caroline Froese, Wesley Kroeker, Wilfred Ulrich, Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. Unruh, Minnie Unruh, and Nina Unruh.

mittee was given authority to open a mission church in Enid.¹¹¹

The committee asked J. B. Frey, then serving as the superintendent of the Oklahoma Bible Academy at Meno, to give pastoral leadership to the congregation. He served on a temporary basis as coordinator and preacher, conducting services from March to June 1935 until a full-time pastor was appointed. Henry N. Harder, a student at Bethel College, was called by the Mission Committee to serve from summer until Christmas of 1935. The Harders were to return in April 1936 to serve on a full-time basis.¹¹²

The first meetings were held in two different rental buildings on Market Street. The support for the pastor and the rent of the buildings were given by the Western District Home Mission Committee.

In 1938, the decision was made to buy land on West York for a permanent facility. With help from the Western District Conference, the General Conference, and several congregations, a new church, costing \$7,250 was dedicated in July 1939. By donating their labor, the members of the congregation made a major donation to the project. Simon Unruh, lead carpenter, made a large contribution to the building with his time and skill.

A major project for the new congregation was the writing of a constitution. During 1937-1938, many meetings were held to put together a statement of faith and by-laws. The constitution was formally adopted in September 1938. At the same time, the congregation chose Grace Mennonite Church as its name.

On October 16, 1938, twenty charter members officially organized the Grace Mennonite Church.¹¹³ The organizational meeting was led by the Home Mission Committee with A. J. Dyck presiding.¹¹⁴ Charter members were: Rev. and Mrs. Henry N. Harder; Mr. and Mrs. C. B. Schmidt; Mr. and Mrs. Simon Unruh; Mr. and Mrs. Fred Koehn; Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. Unruh; Mr. and Mrs. Tobe B. Unruh; Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Mueller; Mr. and Mrs. Emil J. Schmidt; Mrs. Eva Koehn; Mrs. Anna Koehn; Mrs. Ruth Unruh; and Phyllis Unruh.

The congregation has had eight resident pastors, including: Henry N. Harder, July 1935-March 1943; Ben Rahn, May 1944-April 1947; Albert J. Unruh, April 1948-December 1962; Elmer Ensz, July 1963-April 1967; Larry Wilson, April 1967-August 1970; Victor Becker, September 1970-August 1975; Wilfred Ulrich, September 1975-present; and Ted Kuschel, 1984-present.

111. H. N. Harder, letter, October 30, 1962.

112. Harder, letter.

113. Haury, *Prairie People*, p. 266.

114. Harder, letter.

The Grace Mennonite Church joined the General Conference in 1941. The first resident pastoral family, the Harders, lived in a rented house on West York Street. When they left and the Ben Rahns moved to Enid, a parsonage was bought at 816 South Adams. The Rahns and Albert J. Unruhs lived in this house. The present parsonage at 1810 West Oklahoma was purchased in June of 1963 with Rev. and Mrs. Elmer Enszt the first family to live in it.

The Grace Mennonite Church has from its beginning supported the mission work of the General Conference, several individual missionaries, and the Go Ye Mission. Support for individuals included Mrs. Mary Ellen Rowland, Bill and Dahna Regier, Elizabeth Foth, and Russell and Virginia Mueller. The Muellers have been supported by the congregation since 1961.

The church has supported the Oklahoma Bible Academy (OBA) financially as well as with members serving on the board of directors. Many from Grace Mennonite received their high school education at OBA. Members served in administration and in the construction of the facility at Meno. Wesley Kroeker was director of development for the new facility at Enid and presently Verlin Koehn and Ted Kuschel serve on the board.

J. B. Frey, H. N. Harder, Ben Rahn, and Albert J. Unruh (during the first part of his ministry) were supported by the Home Mission Committee. When the subsidy was reduced by half in 1950, the congregation assumed the other half. There were questions as to whether or not this subsidy was a gift or a loan. A decision was made in 1952 to repay the Conference the total amount of \$7,000. At this time the church became self-supporting.

In the early years of the congregation, there was a question of language in the Sunday school material. In 1937, Heinrich T. Neufeld insisted on a German curriculum. He with several families left the congregation and started Bethel Mennonite Church on South Fourth Street in Enid.

Neufeld continued at the Bethel Mennonite Church until 1965. Two years later, Albert J. Unruh was asked to preach in both Grace Mennonite Church and the Bethel Mennonite Church. The Bethel congregation took action in 1959 to join with the Grace Mennonite Church under his leadership.

Unruh was active in visiting Mennonite families in the Enid community. He would take the youth and members to the local nursing homes, county hospital, Enid State School, and jail for programs. He was also able to reach many families who had no church affiliation in the community. At the time he resigned, due to poor health, the membership was 180. Also during Unruh's ministry, communion services were held on a semiannual basis with the Enid Mennonite

Brethren Church. There were also joint services at Easter and Thanksgiving which were well attended, and these services were on an alternating basis with the pastors taking turns in preaching. In later years, these services became more infrequent and currently are not held.

Grace Mennonite is active in inter-Mennonite work. Through Mennonite Disaster Service (such as the Enid flood cleanup in 1978), meat canning and relief, the members have contributed to the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The women of the church, through Grace Mission Circle and Women in Mission, have been active in MCC and Western District projects. A number of their young people have taken part in voluntary service in various areas such as Children's Haven in Reynosa, Mexico.

On a local level they served in their early years in a radio ministry and in nursing home and court house services. Members are now active in Compassionate Friends, Horn of Plenty, and the Northwest Oklahoma Pastoral Care Association.

An early concern of the congregation was how to encourage Mennonite families in Enid to join the church. They have also had a mission concern for their own community. Their Evangelism Committee has tried innovative ways to interest persons in the area near the church. This has included a free hamburger fry and watermelon feed, open to the community.

In 1960, action was taken to buy a lot west of the church building and, in the fall of 1961, planning began to enlarge the church facility. Formal action to build was taken in December 1964 and the new sanctuary to the west side of the original structure was constructed at a cost of \$72,400. It was dedicated in the summer of 1966. The original church was remodeled in 1976.

Through the years, Grace Mennonite has been able to reach persons who do not have Mennonite background. The study of Mennonite congregations by Leland Harder showed that Grace had one of the highest percentages of members from a non-Mennonite background at the time of the study in the Western District Conference.¹¹⁵

An adequate program for youth has been a continuing congregational concern. This was an issue at the time Larry Wilson was pastor. In 1972, a summer youth minister, John Carmean, was engaged to serve in that capacity. In 1978, Rev. and Mrs. Yoshi Inamine, Japanese students at Mennonite Biblical Seminary, served as summer assistants.

115. Leland Harder, *General Conference Mennonite Church Fact Book of Congregational Membership* (1971), B-14.

As a missionary outreach in Enid and surrounding areas, Verlin Koehn was ordained in 1984 as director of Northwest Oklahoma Youth for Christ. The Sunday school partially supports him in this ministry. Other ways the church has shown concern for children and youth has been through a vital Vacation Bible School each summer and with a grant program for students attending OBA, a Christian grade school, or a Mennonite college.

A co-pastor, Ted Kuschel, accepted a call from the congregation to work with Wilfred Ulrich in August 1984. Since Ulrich had reached retirement age, it was agreed that Kuschel would serve in a full-time capacity and Ulrich in a part-time assignment. Under Kuschel's leadership, an innovative program for youth, the Pioneer Program, was begun.

Grace Mennonite has an excellent adult choir, a male quartet, and ladies' trio, who through the years have sung for many groups in the Enid area as well as various Oklahoma and Kansas churches and organizations.

The church has been an active participant in the Oklahoma Convention and its retreat program, with Norman (Shorty) Unruh and Wilfred Ulrich in leadership positions.

West New Hopedale: thankful and faithful

Wilma McKee

West New Hopedale holds the distinction of being an old church and at the same time a fairly new church. Their history is an interesting blend of cooperation and independence.

They came from Kansas with the opening of the Cherokee Strip in 1893. Their background country was Volhynia, Russia. In America they came first to Pennsylvania and then settled in Canton, Kansas.¹¹⁶ Many were not able to stake claims but within a few years bought land from those who had homesteaded in the area of Meno and Ringwood, Oklahoma.¹¹⁷

West New Hopedale was a part of the New Hopedale church in Meno from its beginning in 1895. Because these members lived near Ringwood they felt the inconvenience of traveling to Meno by horse and buggy for services, so the church met in two separate places. The Ringwood group met in the Riverside public school about four miles

116. For more details see the section on the New Hopedale Mennonite Church, Meno.

117. "History: West New Hopedale Mennonite Church," February 24, 1985.

north of Ringwood, and became known as the West New Hopedale Church. They continued as one congregation for fifty years, meeting separately and coming together for business meetings and special occasions.

Pastors who served both churches, besides the first elder Johann Ratzlaff, were Karl Schartner, David H. Schmidt, Tobias P. Wedel, Tobias P. Unruh, Gerhard Friesen, Henry Thiessen, J. J. Ratzlaff, J. B. Epp, and H. U. Schmidt. Albert Unruh was called and ordained as assistant pastor in 1941 and was the last pastor to serve the two churches jointly.

In 1909, three acres of land four miles north of Ringwood were given to the New Hopedale church by Ben Eck for a building lot and cemetery. The church building was begun on October 21, 1909, and the finished building was dedicated on February 20, 1910.

Singing praises to God has always been a special joy to this congregation. From 1919 to 1921 John J. Ratzlaff taught them their do-re-mi's in a singing school which was well attended by young and old. When snow drifts or mud blocked the way, the congregation walked and Ratzlaff rode his faithful mule from a longer distance near Meno.

Sunday school was an important part of West New Hopedale from its beginning. In early years, each person was required to purchase their own quarterly and until the 1930s only the German language was used. The change came because the high school age girls requested English quarterlies.¹¹⁸

In 1946, the church decided to become a separate organization. The reasons were that church members felt they could be a better witness in their community if they had their own pastor and planned their own outreach and mission emphasis. This separation was made with the blessing of the Meno group, who deeded over the land and building to the Ringwood group. The fifty-seven members decided to retain the name West New Hopedale Mennonite Church. J. J. Smith, a member, gave one acre of land on which a parsonage was built.¹¹⁹ In the same year the ladies of the church formed a Ladies' Mission Society and a Constitution of twenty articles with specific doctrinal details was written. Included are articles on marriage, the oath, nonresistance, the Christian walk, holding government office, future life, and angels (fallen and unfallen).¹²⁰

Harold Dirks was called to serve the church in March 1947. In 1948, West New Hopedale joined the Western District and Rudolph

118. "History of the West New Hopedale Mennonite Church," 1960.

119. "History," 1985.

120. Constitution of West New Hopedale Mennonite Church, Ringwood.

Toews began his five-year ministry in July 1949. In 1953, the church decided to begin a missionary program. A committee elected each year worked on plans for an outreach program with an annual conference on home and foreign missions. Missionaries are usually invited as speakers. Also during Toews's ministry, several women from the church were encouraged to take part in a child evangelism meeting held in the Ringwood Presbyterian Church. This resulted in the beginning of Good News Clubs which has been a joint effort between several Ringwood churches. During these years, the church asked Back to the Bible radio broadcast for direction in starting a missionary program and Theodore Epp came to give advice and help. The church later took part in an areawide campaign in the Ringwood School auditorium.

Edward Wiebe became pastor in 1954. During his seven years of ministry, the church discussed building a Sunday school addition. This became a possibility when Arthur Unruh offered sixty acres of wheat ground for rent to the church. The money from this gift was used to build the Sunday school addition which was dedicated on April 3, 1960. The church also celebrated at this time an anniversary of fifty years from when the church building was dedicated in 1910. Special speakers were Waldo Harder and Albert J. Unruh, former pastor. Another productive area of ministry which was started under the direction of Wiebe was the monthly singing and preaching service in the Fellowship Home at Fairview, Oklahoma.

Ivan Schultz served the congregation as pastor for five years beginning in 1961 and for three more years—1968 to 1971. In between Schultz's pastorates, Albert Unruh served a second time for two years.

Because the church has had a vital mission interest which they consider their greatest aid to spiritual growth, they have rejoiced when members went out from their congregation in service for God. In 1948, Frank Thomas was licensed as a minister. In 1949, Ruby Unruh was ordained as a missionary with Go Ye Mission. Leo Thomas became an ordained minister in 1951, and Arthur Johnson was licensed in 1956. Hulda Grace Thomas from West New Hopedale has also been active in many kinds of church service.

West New Hopedale has had a strong interest in mission work among the Indians, often having missionaries from different Indian missions as speakers. Every other month, the first Sunday offering goes for Indian work.

Other pastors who have served are John Gossen, two years; Melvin Koehn, three years; and Marion Hoffsommer, two years. Present pastor since 1980 is Steve Richert.

The West New Hopedale congregation has good fellowship with

different churches in Ringwood. During the summer months, they have united Sunday evening services and during Holy Week they have evening and morning Bible studies. They worship together also in Thanksgiving services.

They experience joy in the unity and love of a close membership who come together not only for worship and study but for picnics, family night gatherings, and fellowship meals. At present they have a quarterly worship service in the Carmen Nursing Home in Carmen, Oklahoma.¹²¹

The present membership is twenty and their decline is a source of prayer and concern for the congregation. Especially they would like to see growth in the number of young people in their group. As one of the members has said, "Of course we would like to grow in numbers, but the most important thing which is asked of us by our Lord is faithfulness."¹²²

On the fiftieth anniversary of building their church, they quoted this Scripture from Psalm 105:2,5, which seems to combine their early love of singing, their urgent sense of mission, and their thanksgiving for what the Lord has done in their midst. "Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him; talk ye of all his wondrous works. Remember his marvelous works that he hath done, his wonders and the judgment of his mouth."

Clinton: training for ministry

Wilma McKee

Two forces came together in 1949-1950 which led to the formation of the First Mennonite Church of Clinton, Oklahoma. First, the Sichar Mennonite Church had discontinued in November 1947, and some of its former members were left without a church home. And other Mennonites living in the area were interested in a church.¹²³

The second force came when Western District entered its third phase of home mission work in 1950. Urban church building became the top concern of the Home Mission Committee. So, when Mennonites living in and around the Clinton area asked for help, the Western District was quick to respond.¹²⁴

121. Written interview with History Committee: Mrs. Malinda Johnson, Art Unruh, Steve Richert (pastor).

122. Telephone conversation between Mrs. Malinda Johnson, Ringwood, and Wilma McKee.

123. Lloyd Chester Penner, "The Mennonites on the Washita River." Ed. D. dissertation, Oklahoma State University, 1976, p. 195.

124. Haury, *Prairie People*, p. 312.



In 1950, B. H. Janzen, field secretary of the Western District Conference, came to Clinton to survey the community.

B. H. Janzen, field secretary for the Western District Conference, came to Clinton and, along with A. P. Schmidt and other interested persons, surveyed the area.

First meetings were held on Sunday evenings in a music hall which had previously been an old army barracks. The meetings were led by ministers from nearby Mennonite churches at Geary, Hydro, and Gotebo. In the summer of 1950, Sunday school and morning worship services were started and Levi Koehn served the group. In the fall, students from Bethel College—Arthur Isaak, Henry Penner, and Henry Janzen—came on weekends to conduct services until February 1951 when Henry Penner accepted the congregation's call to be its first resident minister.¹²⁵

On September 30, 1951, Penner was ordained and the church was organized with nineteen charter members. A constitution was agreed upon and the church became a member of the Western District Conference.¹²⁶ The charter members were: Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Abrahams; Mr. and Mrs. Carl Holleman; Mr. and Mrs. C. L. Janzen; Mr. and Mrs. Rudolph Pankratz; Mrs. Margaret Schmeier; Irvin Schmidt; Mrs. Betty J. Hill; A. P. Schmidt; Mrs. Hilda Schmidt; Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Schmidt; Mr. and Mrs. J. N. Wiebe; and Rev. and Mrs. Henry Penner.¹²⁷

On November 6, 1952, a country schoolhouse was purchased from a district southeast of Custer and moved into Clinton where it was

125. Art Nickel, speech given at centennial service, March 24, 1974.

126. Haury, *Prairie People*, p. 314.

127. Nickel, speech.

remodeled and served to house the congregation until November 30, 1958.¹²⁸ The congregation grew rapidly in the first few years and soon reached seventy in membership.

The second ministerial family to serve the Clinton church was the Walter H. Regier family. They served from 1954 to 1965.¹²⁹ In 1955, the congregation decided to begin gathering funds for a new church building. In October 1957, construction began following a ground breaking ceremony. The new brick building, thirty-four by ninety feet, with two thirty-by-thirty-foot wings, cost a total of \$35,000 with furnishings. About 2,000 hours of donated labor were given by local Mennonites and those from surrounding Mennonite churches. Financial help was received from the Western District and from local business men. Among the hours donated were those given by a Building Committee composed of H. E. Nickel, A. P. Schmidt, A. Krause, and by Jake Klaassen, senior member of the present church, who was finish supervisor. At the dedication service on November 30, 1958, Levi Koehn represented the Western District Home Mission Committee.¹³⁰

By 1961, when the church celebrated its tenth anniversary and Koehn again came to deliver the anniversary message, membership had grown to ninety. "We praise God for all He has done for us as a church," said Walter Regier. "We have felt keenly the help given us by the Home Missions Committee and the Conference."¹³¹ Among those who have been nourished and challenged in First Mennonite and have gone out for service is Jerry Regier, son of Walter and Ruby Regier, who is president of the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C.¹³²

In 1965, Palmer Becker accepted the call of the church to be its pastor. He and his wife Ardys had been attending Mennonite Biblical Seminary after serving four and a half years in Taiwan.¹³³

Their four years of ministry were marked by new ventures. A financial plan was begun where all giving was channeled into one offering a month, with one Sunday designated for an offering of ideas, service, and self-dedication. Giving increased by 40 percent. Beliefs and membership were defined by a study of seven crucial questions. This study was aimed at helping members defend their faith and develop a discipline of Bible study. Education for ministry

128. Penner, "Washita River," p. 196.

129. Penner, "Washita River," p. 196.

130. Walter Regier, "A Brief History of the First Mennonite Church" (1961).

131. Regier, "Brief History."

132. History Committee and pastor of First Mennonite Church, Clinton: Leonard Abrahams, Ewald Schmidt, Jake Klaassen, and Chris Atkins.

133. Letter from Palmer Becker to Wilma McKee, October 15, 1986.

emphasized that all members must be trained for ministry at their level of competence, in order to be a priesthood of believers. Small groups were developed and became the core of ministry and relationship in the church. An active, dedicated youth group was also developed in those years.

In addition, Becker served as chairman of the Oklahoma Retreat Committee and organized Pre-Draft Boot Camps. During these years, about twenty church members became active in the Tutoring Friends Program. Black children were taught and friendships developed in a time when black-white relationships were tense.

Other programs of the church were enriched. "One of my joys while in Clinton was working with Charles Regier," said Becker. "I have always believed that the minister of music is as important to the spirit of the church as the minister of the Word is to the content. Another joy was to work with the Koinonia Mennonite Church. We had joint Daily Vacation Bible School and mission festivals. It was a joy to have Lawrence Hart serve communion before I was ordained and to invite me to make one of my first pastoral calls."

Beckers left the church when he became executive secretary of the General Conference Commission on Home Ministries.¹³⁴

Lawrence Hart served the church as interim pastor until Daniel G. Regier became pastor from 1970 to 1975. In 1970, the church became self-supporting and reached its goal of 100 members.¹³⁵

Steve Strunk of Quakertown, Pennsylvania, served First Mennonite from 1976 to 1981. It was his first pastorate. During these years, a monthly Men's Breakfast meeting was started.¹³⁶

Richard L. Malone was pastor for three years from 1981 to 1984. During his pastorate a new addition was made to the church, consisting of kitchen facilities, a fellowship hall, four classrooms, a storage room, and restrooms. The building project chairman was Elmer Quiring. Dedication of the new facilities was on October 30, 1983.¹³⁷ Also during these years, the Awana Program was started for the children of the church.

The present pastor is Chris A. Atkins. His service began in September of 1985. Atkins is present president of the Clinton Ministerial Alliance and serves on the Oklahoma Convention Task Force for Church Planting.¹³⁸

In December 1985, the church purchased a house and property

134. Becker, letter.

135. Haury, *Prairie People*, p. 314.

136. History Committee.

137. *Clinton Daily News*, October 26, 1983.

138. History Committee.

south of the present Fellowship Hall. The house is to serve in the future as a guest house for members who travel a distance to church and for visiting speakers. Sunday school classes and the Awana groups will also use it.¹³⁹

Through the years, members who left the church usually did so because of occupational transfer, marriage outside the denomination, or going away to school.

When the Bergthal Mennonite Church in Corn closed, some families began coming to Clinton because of convenience in travel, though quite a few had their roots in the Herold Mennonite Church of Cordell, Oklahoma.¹⁴⁰

Church membership is at present 112, with 93 in regular attendance. There are twenty-four young children and eight older teens.¹⁴¹

Annual events which continue to be special to members are Harvest Missionary Festival, spring meetings with an outside speaker, Christmas Eve service, Oklahoma Convention, Awana award banquet, and an annual soup supper.

Ties with other churches include involvement with the Indian churches which has ranged from combined services to programs given in the Hammon church. Also worship programs have been held which were led by the Mennonite Indian Leaders Council. Pastoral exchange programs have been conducted with Herold Mennonite and the Mennonite Brethren church in Clinton. Programs have been exchanged with neighboring churches of other denominations.

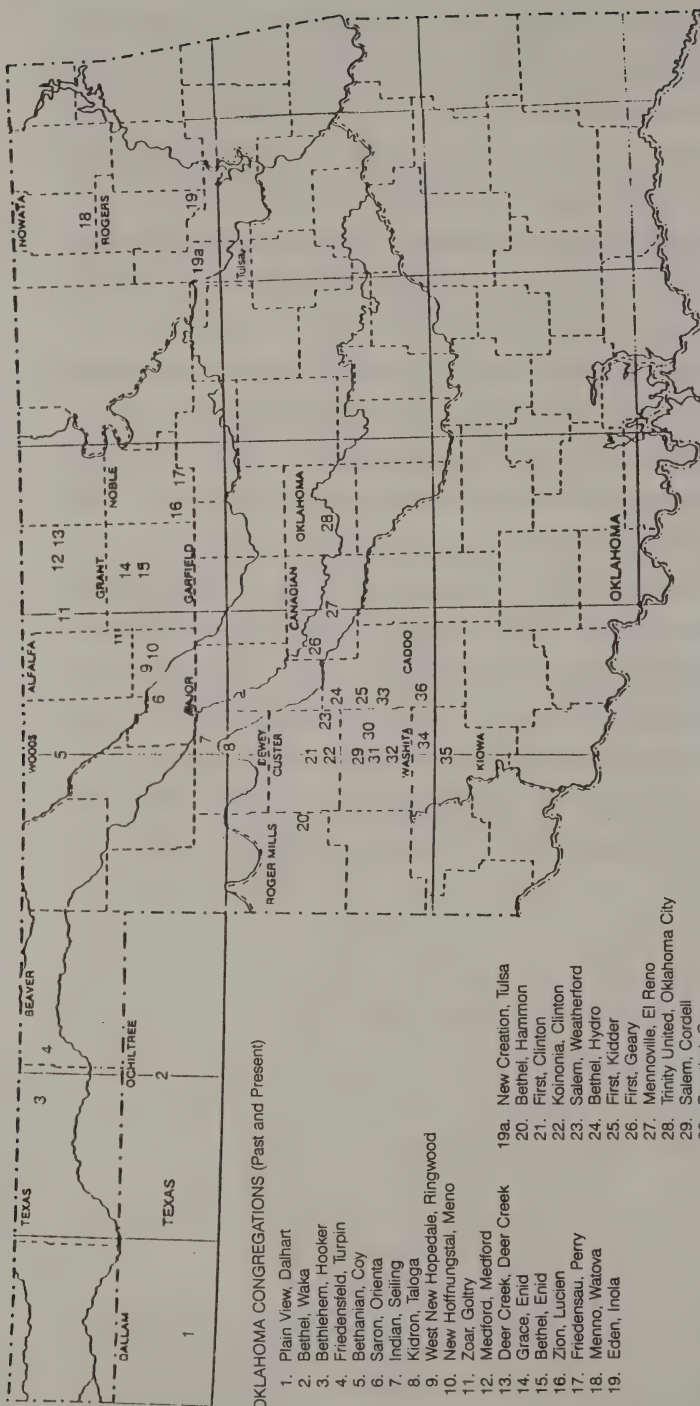
The church's ministry is built on the text found in Acts 2:42, "and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer."¹⁴²

139. History Committee.

140. Becker, letter.

141. History Committee.

142. History Committee.



OKLAHOMA CONGREGATIONS (Past and Present)

1. Plain View, Dalhart
2. Bethel, Waka
3. Bethlehem, Hooker
4. Friedensfeld, Turpin
5. Bethanian, Coy
6. Saron, Orienta
7. Indian, Selling
8. Kidron, Taloga
9. West New Hopedale, Ringwood
10. New Hoffmungsstal, Meno
11. Zoar, Gottry
12. Medford, Medford
13. Deer Creek, Deer Creek
14. Grace, Enid
15. Bethel, Enid
16. Zion, Lucien
17. Friedensau, Perry
18. Menno, Watova
19. Eden, Iola
- 19a. New Creation, Tulsa
20. Bethel, Hammon
21. First, Clinton
22. Koinonia, Clinton
23. Salem, Weatherford
24. Bethel, Hydro
25. First, Kidder
26. First, Geary
27. Merriville, El Reno
28. Trinity United, Oklahoma City
29. Salem, Cordell
30. Bergthai, Corn
31. Herold, Cordell
32. Sichar, Cordell
33. Springfield, Easky
34. Ebenezer, Golebo
35. Friedenshal, Golebo
36. Greenfield, Carnegie

4. Once our partners in the gospel

Robert R. Coon

Our Oklahoma story is not complete without reference to some of the congregations that were and are no more.

Why did these General Conference, Western District, or Oklahoma Convention churches not continue? Consider some of the general, if not specific, patterns which seem to emerge after delving into these histories.

Most of the early Mennonites seemed to have settled in Oklahoma for economic, not religious, reasons. Most of them chose the open country, away from the towns, in sparsely populated areas, often far away from the nearest Mennonite church. Memberships in general never grew very large. Most of their life spans were not long. Many of the churches had lay or nonresident pastors.

Reasons for closing varied. Common themes were the inability to make a living from the land. Their Germanic aloofness kept others at a distance. Work opportunities for young people were limited.

Some of the more recent closings demonstrate similar signs but there are variations which come from urban closings. Members are not readily gleaned from the surrounding population when a specific service orientation (Trinity, Oklahoma City) or a specific religious orientation (Fellowship, Tulsa) is the primary call to take part in the life of a Christian Mennonite congregation.

The most important part of this chapter is a call to reassess our work and mission for the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ as we read these histories.



First congregation organized in Oklahoma was Mennoville in 1891.

Mennoville Church (Canadian County), El Reno

A small, frame church building near El Reno, Oklahoma, on Highway 81, has a marker indicating it was the first established Mennonite church in Oklahoma.¹ It is known as the Mennoville Mennonite Church.

Its life began when services were held in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Bergman in late 1890 or early 1891. Joel Sprunger and Isaac Penner were ordained as deacons.²

Reiseprediger H. R. Voth organized the group in 1891³ with twenty-seven charter members.⁴ Some of the first members were Mennonite personnel from the mission work at Darlington.

The congregation was the first Oklahoma congregation to join the

1. Lloyd C. Penner, "The Mennonites on the Washita River: The Culmination of Four Centuries of Migrations." Ed.D. dissertation, Oklahoma State University, 1976, pp. 167-68.

2. David A. Haury, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981), pp. 123-25.

3. Haury, pp. 123-25.

4. Penner, pp. 167-68.

Western District Conference.⁵ It faithfully sent representatives to forty-one of fifty-eight sessions.⁶

Early ministerial leadership was given by Joel Sprunger, ordained May 14, 1893. Later, when Sprunger left, J. S. Krehbiel, Geary, traveled by horse and buggy twice a month to serve the group.⁷

Membership varied between ten and thirty-one.⁸ Regular services were held until 1952 with fellowship meetings later in 1957-58.⁹

Other ministers who served the church, in addition to Sprunger and Krehbiel were Jacob Zweiacher, Henry Funk, J. B. Epp, H. T. Neufeld, H. Funk again, and Henry D. Penner.¹⁰ Students from Bethel College also filled the pulpit in the 1950s.

From this group came three ministers, one missionary, and one deaconess.¹¹

On June 8, 1975, over 100 persons attended a special service at this historic building.¹²

Bergthal Church (Washita County), Corn

The reservations of the Arapaho-Cheyenne tribes were opened by the government in 1892 for homesteading. J. J. Kliever sent letters north to encourage Mennonites to settle in the Washita area. The Peter Pankratz family and others from Nebraska came.

An appeal was made to the Western District Home Mission Committee to help them organize a congregation. Elder Dietrich Gaedert of the Hoffnungsau congregation near Inman, Kansas, was sent by the committee to carry out that mission.¹³

The congregation, to be known as the Bergthal Mennonite Church, consisting of fifteen families from the Alexanderwohl and Hoffnungsau communities in central Kansas, organized the first General Conference church in the area on August 24, 1894.¹⁴ They joined the

5. Haury, p. 125.

6. Howard Schmidt, "Statistics and Attendance of Western District Conference Sessions." Unpublished paper and chart, Bethel College, 1962.

7. Penner, p. 167.

8. Gordon R. Dyck, "The United States General Conference Extinct Churches (1874-1959). Unpublished paper, Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1959, p. 41.

9. Western Conference District Mennoville Mennonite Church files, Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA).

10. Haury, p. 464.

11. Penner, p. 167.

12. Penner, p. 168.

13. Penner, p. 172.

14. Marvin Elroy Kroeker, "The Mennonites of Oklahoma to 1907." M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1954, p. 49.



Dietrich Gaeddert, from the Hoffnungsau congregation in Kansas, expressed the wish that the Bergthal congregation could be a bright light in the paganism of the Indians.

Western District Conference the same year.¹⁵ Church representatives missed only one conference session from 1895 to 1962.¹⁶

Early services were held in the Sichar and Greenfield schoolhouses west of Corn, Oklahoma, and later in homes, schools, or the Shelly Mission on alternate Sundays.¹⁷ Some of these services were divided, with Peter Pankratz leading at one place and the deacons at the other.¹⁸ When the decision was made to divide permanently in 1896, the settlers east of the river retained the Bergthal name as a congregation and met at the mission or in private homes.¹⁹

The congregation met until 1901 at the Greenfield and Sparta schoolhouses with a large Sunday school because families were large.²⁰ A need was felt for permanent quarters. A church structure was dedicated November 17, 1901, five miles northwest of Corn.²¹ An addition was added in 1910 because the church was too small. The

15. Haury, p. 125.

16. Schmidt, chart.

17. Kroeker, p. 49.

18. Penner, p. 173.

19. Kroeker, Emil Hinz interview, December 30, 1952.

20. Penner, p. 176.

21. Kroeker, p. 50.

congregation hosted the Western District Conference in 1911.²²

Pastors at Bergthal were: Peter Pankratz, J. J. Kliewer, John Peters, John Flaming, J. G. Baergen, H. L. Janzen, H. W. Franzen, J. J. Kroeker, Henry H. Hege, W. Harley King, Walter Siemens, Tillman Nussbaum, John K. Warkentin, Albert Epp, Vernon Lohrentz, and Lloyd C. Penner.²³

Evelyn Heidebrecht was ordained as a missionary from the congregation in 1958. The church was remodeled in 1960.²⁴ Membership reached 140 at one time.²⁵ It receded to under sixty near the end of its life. Official meetings ceased in 1969. Lloyd Penner moved back into the community and services resumed until November 17, 1974. Deaths of leading members and failing health among others brought about termination.²⁶

Friedensau Church (Noble County), Perry

About fourteen immigrants from the same family relationship living southeast of Enid moved into the Perry area and organized a church about 1895.²⁷ They met in homes and in a schoolhouse before building a meeting place about six miles southeast of Perry in 1898. This became the Friedensau [meadow of peace] Mennonite Church, in Noble County.

H. H. Koller helped organize this church and became its first lay minister. C. E. Hirschler became the next minister after Koller's death. He was ordained and continued serving until 1915. He also continued as an itinerant minister. Hirschler was the last regular minister the church had.

The congregation was a member of the Western District Conference but not of the General Conference.²⁸ The church had representation at 80 percent of the Western District Conference sessions from 1898 to 1932.²⁹

The church building materials were paid for by the Western District Conference, and the building was erected by community volunteer labor.

22. Penner, p. 177.

23. Haury, p. 463.

24. Penner, p. 178.

25. Edna Boese, "History of the Bergthal Church Corn Oklahoma." Unpublished paper, no date, p. 6.

26. Penner, p. 179.

27. Haury, p. 438 (gives an 1898 beginning date).

28. Minutes of the General Conference Mennonite Church, 1935.

29. Schmidt, chart.

This church had regular services of worship and Sunday school every Sunday along with a twelve-week Bible school. After 1915, the *Reiseprediger* (itinerant preacher) came through two or three times a year preaching and holding special services. The highest membership the church had was forty in 1926. A number of these people were from the Zion Mennonite Church near Lucien, Oklahoma, when it closed its doors in 1912.

The depression played a large part in the closing of the church in 1935. Some of its younger people went off to school and never returned. Others married and went off to new communities. Others left the farm to work in town. Older members died, decreasing the membership.

Sichar Church (Washita County), Cordell

The Sichar Mennonite Church of Washita County “was organized on April 14, 1896 with the help of Elder Jacob Toews . . . by a group of Mennonite settlers who withdrew from the Bergthal Mennonite Church (Corn, Oklahoma). . . .”³⁰

“The first minister was Peter Pankratz . . . the first services were held in a schoolhouse. In 1897, a church building located on the Jacob Janzen farm was dedicated. In 1899, the congregation divided, the part called the Herold Mennonite Church obtaining possession of the building. The other group under the name Sichar Mennonite Church in 1900 erected a new church building two and a half miles south of the Herold Church (six miles northeast of Cordell).”³¹

Sichar joined the Western District Conference in 1896. In its fifty-two-year history, delegates were present at the sessions all but seven times.³²

Ministers at Sichar were Peter Pankratz, Michael Klaassen, Henry D. Schmidt, Abr. W. Froese, John H. Harms, Albert G. Schmidt, Menno H. Kliwer, and Andrew Holliman.³³ All of its pastors were resident pastors, living from two to six miles from the church.

The church had a full program of services for all ages. In the period 1933-35, it changed from German to English. Sichar was always self-supporting. Its highest membership was in 1935 with 102 when Menno H. Kliwer was pastor. When it closed in 1947, the membership had decreased to eighty-nine.

30. *Mennonite Encyclopedia* manuscript “S”, box 1, p. 592, at MLA.

31. *Mennonite Encyclopedia* manuscript “S”.

32. Schmidt, chart.

33. Haury, p. 463.

Many of the members moved away. At one time there were over thirty living in California. The original differences with the Herold congregation were forgotten. Many were glad to join there. Building materials were used to construct the Indian Mission Church at Clinton.³⁴



Mennonite families who had a deep concern for the salvation of their children started a Sunday school in July 1898 in the Springfield schoolhouse.

Springfield Church (Caddo County), Eakly

Mennonite families who had a deep concern for the salvation of their children started a Sunday school in July 1898 at the Springfield schoolhouse. There was a strong sense of need to organize as a congregation. This became the Springfield Mennonite Church, Eakly, Oklahoma.

Jacob Kaufman had been called to be the minister but declined, suggesting that they follow the advice of Elder J. J. Flickner for aid in communion services and future plans. His advice was to be patient and carefully search out the type of church they should be.

On February 2, 1899, Elder Flickner baptized thirteen young people. On this same day, a motion was made to combine with the Berthel Mennonite Church at Korn (later called Corn). This motion failed.

34. Oklahoma Convention Historical Committee conversation with Otto Nickel and Lawrence Hart.

The group met again in July 1899 and made the decision to become a congregation. There were thirty charter members.³⁵ Their organization took place September 13, 1899, under the leadership of Christian Ramseier. A council was elected the following day. C. P. Stucky and Joseph Kaufman were elected as evangelists and they served until April 1900.³⁶

The church joined the Western District Conference in 1908,³⁷ and the Howard Schmidt study reveals that they were fairly regular in representation at these sessions.³⁸

The early group were Swiss (Schweitzer) Mennonites from Pretty Prairie and Moundridge.³⁹ Because of this background, they kept to themselves. Names on the church rolls were Kaufman, Albrecht, Stucky, Zerger, Swartz, Merk, Holly, and Ewy.⁴⁰ The building was seventeen miles south of Hydro.⁴¹

The two pastors who served the group, C. P. Stucky and Joseph Kaufman,⁴² were both lay, unpaid farmers, living not far from the church. All the services were in German.⁴³ Membership was fifty-four in 1910.⁴⁴

The church closed its doors in 1919, the remaining members being given letters to join elsewhere. Economic conditions were poor for farmers, so most returned to Kansas. A cemetery still exists seventeen miles south of Hydro and half a mile off Highway 58.⁴⁵

Zion Church (Noble County), Lucien

The charter membership of Zion Mennonite Church had come from Kansas via the area southeast of Enid near Perry in Noble County. They organized September 25, 1898, with about ten charter members. At the organization, John Lichti, a lay minister, was elected as pastor. He served the church until its close in 1912. The church building was located one mile south of Lucien, then known as West Perry.

35. Gordon R. Dyck, "The United States General Conference Extinct Churches (1847-1959)." Unpublished paper, Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1959, p. 60.

36. *Protokol Buch der Springfield Gemeinde, 1899-1919*, MLA, translated from German.

37. Haury, p. 437.

38. Schmidt, chart.

39. Haury, p. 126.

40. *Protokol Buch*.

41. Dyck, p. 60.

42. Haury, p. 464.

43. Dyck, p. 60.

44. Haury, p. 437.

45. Dyck, p. 60.



John Lichti was lay minister of the Zion congregation from its organization in 1898 to its closing in 1912: *Lichti with his wife Lavina Ruesser and children Elmer, Ella, and Milton.*

Zion's highest membership was seventeen in 1911 with forty-five attending Sunday school.⁴⁶ All services, including a two-week Bible school, were conducted in German.

The congregation first attended the Western District Conference sessions in 1902, presumably the year it joined the Conference. It was fairly regularly represented at the conference until 1911.⁴⁷

After Lichti left to serve the Deer Creek Mennonite Church, the Western District Home Mission Committee sent itinerant ministers to serve the church.

The church disbanded September 22, 1912, the remaining ten members leaving, some going to Deer Creek or Hydro, others to California.

The main reason for closing was that the members and pastor moved away. Gordon R. Dyck in his study believes the reasons were economic.⁴⁸

46. H. P. Krehbiel, *Mennonite Churches of North America: A Statistical Compilation* (Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book Concern; Newton: Herold Book & Pub. Co., 1911), p. 46.

47. Schmidt, chart.

48. Dyck, p. 65.

Friedensthal Church (Kiowa County), Gotebo

The organization of the Friedensthal Mennonite Church took place in 1903 with twenty-seven charter members under the direction of J. J. Kliewer. The congregation met in a schoolhouse six miles southwest of Gotebo. They at first had planned to meet in town but since the newly opened Indian territory was about twenty miles long, the church divided and another group, the Ebenezer Mennonite Church, formed and met six miles northeast of town. Friedensthal (valley of peace) joined the Western District Conference in 1903. From 1903 to 1920 the church was represented at all Western District Conference sessions.⁴⁹

Ministers at Friedensthal were: J. J. Kliewer, elder; P. R. Voth, lay minister; W. C. Voth, missionary student; C. P. Richert, lay minister; and G. G. Kliewer, lay minister.⁵⁰

William C. Voth and his wife Matilda (Kliewer) Voth from Emmaus church, Whitewater, Kansas, were missionaries from this church. They served in China from 1919 to 1958 and also in Japan and Taiwan.⁵¹

The congregation never occupied a church building. At one time a building fund was started, but plans did not finalize and the money eventually was given to foreign missions. All the services of the group were in German.

The highest membership was in 1909 with seventy-five members. In 1911, J. J. Kliewer and thirty members with thirty-one children moved to Carlsbad, New Mexico, because of drought and poor crops. There seemed to be the promise of much rain in the Carlsbad area. This did not prove true.

The church finally closed in 1921 due to the unpredictability of good crop production. Many became discouraged and left the area. At its closing, there were twelve resident members who joined the Ebenezer church. This was made possible because of the increasing use of automobiles.

Ebenezer Church (Kiowa County), Gotebo

Ebenezer was one of three Mennonite church communities which organized between 1901 and 1907 in the Gotebo area. Most of those

49. Schmidt, chart.

50. Dyck, p. 27.

51. Haury, p. 471.

who settled here were from previous homesteading endeavors in Oklahoma. J. J. Kliwer, the founder of the Washita Indian Mission in Washita County, came and settled and encouraged others to come.⁵²

The Ebenezer congregation located three miles east and one mile north of Gotebo. It organized in 1903 with forty-two charter members and joined the Western District Conference in 1904.⁵³ The congregation rarely missed being represented at a Western District Conference session.⁵⁴

Ministers who served the congregation were Heinrich Riesen, Fritz Stucky, H. R. Voth, H. H. Wedel, Henry Hege, Noah Unruh, Walter Goossen, and Gerhard M. Peters.⁵⁵

The church was without a regular minister from 1954 to 1973.

The congregation took part with other area General Conference churches in such activities as the Bethel College fellowship meals and programs at the Herold church.⁵⁶

Membership at the church grew to eighty-six in 1910, probably due to some persons joining the congregation from the Friedensthal Mennonite Church, Gotebo, when a number of that church's members migrated to Carlsbad, New Mexico.⁵⁷

Ebenezer existed as a congregation until 1973. Members were finding it difficult to keep on raising crops or cattle in an area beset by drought, dust, and hail storms. Many moved away and finally the church closed its doors.

First Church of Caddo (Caddo County)

The First Mennonite Church of Caddo, Oklahoma, in Caddo County, was organized in 1904. The congregation met in a church building eight and one half miles southeast of Hydro. Gerhard Dick and Bernard Wiebe were its pastors.

The church joined the Western District Conference in 1904. Gerhard Dick and Bernard Wiebe were its conference representatives.

On occasion of a split in 1906, a number of members formed the Bethel Mennonite Church nine miles southwest of Hydro with Dick as pastor.⁵⁸

52. Kroeker, p. 72.

53. Haury, p. 126.

54. Schmidt, chart.

55. Haury, p. 464.

56. Herold Mennonite Church bulletin, March 15, 1953.

57. H. P. Krehbiel, p. 43.

58. Haury, p. 126.

The congregation dissolved in 1910 with the remaining members merging with Bethel.

More details can be found in the Bethel church history and the Oklahoma Convention history in this volume.

Salem Church (Washita County), Cordell

The Salem Mennonite Church was organized sometime between 1904 and 1911⁵⁹ in the McKinley school district five and one half miles northeast of Cordell in Washita County. It was one and one half miles from the Sichar church. Its members came from Kansas. In 1914, it joined both the General Conference and the Western District.

From 1904 through 1914, Salem attended Western District sessions most of the time but not after that date.⁶⁰

Its only pastor was Heinrich D. Schmidt who was a farmer and supported himself this way. The church did not pay its minister.

Throughout the life of the congregation, German was used exclusively in all its services. In 1914, it had its largest membership which was twenty-six.

In 1919, the church closed because of members moving away and some disunity. Some had already joined the nearby Sichar church and others were willing to join there.

Bethanian Church (Woods County), Coy

Peter Janzen and Peter Penner moved with their families to Woodward County (later Woods) in 1902. They were the first Mennonites to settle there. By 1905, there were seventeen charter members of the Bethanian Mennonite Church who organized on March 23. The church joined the Western District Conference the same year.

According to a chart by Howard Schmidt on attendance of churches at the Western District Conference sessions, the church was absent in representation only once in its brief history.⁶¹

Bethanian's membership in 1910 was thirty-one.⁶² By 1911, it reached its peak at thirty-nine.

Persons in the group had come primarily from central Kansas, Mountain Lake, Minnesota, and Corn, Oklahoma. Their first pastor was a farmer, Cornelius Frey, who began his ministry in November of

59. Haury, p. 126.

60. Schmidt, chart.

61. Schmidt, chart.

62. Haury, p. 437.

1908. He was the first and only resident minister of the church until its closing in 1916.

In September 1905, members completed a church building and H. R. Voth dedicated it. Money for the building was borrowed from the Western District Home Mission Board. When the church closed its doors in 1916, it sold the church building to the school district for use as a schoolhouse. Money received went back to the district committee as a debt payment.

Frey moved to Newton, Kansas, for family reasons and so left the congregation without pastoral leadership. World War I was on the horizon and German-speaking persons were not too welcome. In addition, the land was not producing well. But an important factor in terminating was the church's Germanic cultural exclusiveness.⁶³ The church was also isolated from other General Conference churches.

Bethlehem Church (Texas County), Hooker

Mennonites from Kansas arrived in the Oklahoma Panhandle about 1903. Some settled in the Hooker area of Texas County. Some of them began meeting in a small dugout schoolhouse about nine miles southeast of Hooker. Biblical discussions were the order of service.

Records of congregational meetings began in 1906. Organization may have taken place earlier. The Bethlehem congregation joined the Western District Conference in 1907 and was represented nearly every year through 1916.⁶⁴

Ministers were Henry D. Schroeder and Henry Adrian.⁶⁵ The strong spiritual guiding force in the congregation came from H. R. Voth, the *Reiseprediger* (traveling preacher), on his occasional visits.⁶⁶

The congregation had a membership of twenty in the early years. General Conference reports give it as twenty-five in 1911⁶⁷ and seven in 1914.⁶⁸ The 1917 report lists no members.⁶⁹

All the meetings were in German. The only expense, generally, was the heating of the schoolhouse. The church closed when Henry Adrian left for California. The church, evidently, had good relations with

63. Dyck, p. 5.

64. Schmidt, chart.

65. Haury, p. 469.

66. Dyck, p. 7.

67. General Conference reports-1912.

68. General Conference reports-1915.

69. General Conference reports-1917.

a nearby Mennonite Brethren church, and many of the young people joined there. The exact date of closing is unknown.

Kidron Church (Dewey County), Taloga

The members of the Kidron Mennonite Church were originally from Polish and Russian background. H. U. Schmidt held services previous to the organization of 1908. H. R. Voth helped organize the church with twenty charter members in 1908 and this same year they joined the Western District Conference. From 1908 through 1945 the church was represented at all but the 1911, 1922, and 1923 Western District Conference sessions.⁷⁰

The largest membership was fifty-seven in 1923 when F. D. Koehn was minister.⁷¹

The ministers at Kidron were H. Reimer, F. D. Koehn, A. B. Koehn, H. U. Schmidt, A. W. Froese, F. W. Koehn, and Noah Unruh.⁷² The pastors were farmers and had to raise their own support for nearly all the life of the congregation. During the latter years, some support came from the Western District Home Mission Committee.

The congregation never had a church building, meeting first in the Fairview school, three and one half miles southeast of Taloga in Dewey County. In the 1940s, the congregation met in homes. The church was isolated from other General Conference churches, the nearest being Clinton or Orienta, both about forty miles distant.

In the latter part of the 1930s, the Western District Home Mission Committee assisted with pastoral leadership and finances. During this time, the congregation had services only two times a month. In 1941, the church had only three families and nearly closed down then. In 1945, the church was still meeting and optimistic.

Kidron Mennonite Church closed in 1946 due to many members leaving and also to inadequate leadership. Those remaining in the community joined other churches.

Salem Church (Custer County), Weatherford

John Flaming, minister at the Bergthal Mennonite Church at Corn, visited eight or nine families southwest of Weatherford in 1913.⁷³

70. Schmidt, chart.

71. General Conference reports-1924.

72. Haury, p. 465.

73. Haury, pp. 126, 438. On p. 438 he lists 1914 as beginning date.

These families formed a congregation that year called the Salem Mennonite Church.⁷⁴

The congregation organized after Flaming had instructed a number of young people who would have no church to join after baptism. The people decided to organize for the time as a church. John Flaming and Christian Stucky were present at the organization. Flaming was asked to become elder. He baptized eight persons and conducted the Lord's Supper.⁷⁵

Ten families made up the nucleus of the congregation. These were from the Springfield Mennonite Church at Eakly, some Swiss Volhynians from Pretty Prairie, Kansas, and others from Bethany, Kingman, Kansas.⁷⁶

Flaming acted as a nonresident minister and also represented the congregation at the 1915 Western District Conference sessions.⁷⁷

The congregation had Sunday school classes and was served with a sermon whenever possible by the brethren of the Bergthal and Springfield churches.⁷⁸

No information was found as to the reasons for closing in 1919.

Menno Church (Nowata County), Watova

Settlers came from Inman, Hillsboro, and western Kansas and organized the Menno Mennonite Church on August 8, 1915, in the District 44 schoolhouse two and three quarters miles northwest of Watova in Nowata County. Its nearest General Conference neighbor was near Inola forty-five miles away.

Menno joined the Western District Conference in 1923 and from 1920 to 1925 had not missed any but the 1922 session.⁷⁹

The church met in homes until 1920. In this year, it reached its highest membership and bought a farmhouse from J. A. Heidebrecht for \$150 for use as a meeting place.

A church record book of 1916-1921 lists names of members as Buller, Heidebrecht, Janzen, Jantzen, Miller, Androes, Ens, Pauls, Hintegardt, Penner, and Franz.⁸⁰

This church never had a resident minister. H. R. Voth helped them organize and had arranged for neighboring Mennonite pastors to

74. Minutes and Reports of Western District Conference-1913.

75. Minutes and Reports of Western District Conference-1914.

76. Minutes and Reports of Western District Conference-1914.

77. Haury, p. 126.

78. Minutes and Reports of Western District Conference-1914.

79. Schmidt, chart.

80. Menno Mennonite Church record book, 1916-1921.

come in for a worship service at least once a month. The congregation eventually elected two evangelists, H. L. Janzen and B. H. Janzen, who organized and directed a healthy church program. German was used until the days of World War I. During the war and after, the church became bilingual in its services. Isaac Androes and P. R. Gaeddert were lay, unordained ministers in the later years of the church.

January 1, 1927, was the closing date of the church. The membership had sagged to about ten or twelve. According to Gordon R. Dyck in a study he made, the main reason for closing was that the farmers had tried to do small grain farming in cattle raising country. The main leaders of the church were among the first to move away mostly for economic reasons.⁸¹ Family jealousies also caused disunity with many moving back to home communities, although some stayed in the area.

Christian Church (Major County), Meno

The Christian Mennonite Church of Meno, Oklahoma, in Major County, is a mystery church.⁸² According to several sources, it became a member of the General Conference about 1929. Twenty-one members were listed. It did not join the Western District. Oklahoma Convention minutes for this period are missing and thus provide no clue as to any connection with Convention activities. Other sources mention its disbanding sometime before 1933.

Bethel Church (Garfield County), Enid

The Bethel Mennonite Church of Enid, Oklahoma, formed out of a disagreement over the use of English or German Sunday school materials.⁸³ A mission church group under the leadership of Henry N. Harder was considering the change from German to English. Heinrich T. Neufeld, former missionary to the Indians and Oklahoma Bible Academy superintendent and teacher, was against the use of English. A split took place in 1937 which led to the formation

81. Dyck, p. 36.

82. Resources: General Conference reports-1930; Dyck, p. 67; Schmidt, chart; Eldon Schmidt, "Growth and Decline of Churches in the Western District Conference from 1929 to 1957." Unpublished paper, Bethel College, 1958, pp. 1-2; John Voth also remembers a listing in the General Conference bicentennial brochure of several years ago.

83. Resources: "Historical Sketch" of Heinrich T. Neufeld from *The Family Tree of Peter and Aganetha Wiens Neufeld* presented by Heinrich T. Neufeld, p. 76; Haury, pp. 310-11.

of the Bethel Mennonite Church on Fourth Street. This division was a hardship for the mission group.

Neufeld was the only regular pastor Bethel had, serving until his retirement in 1955. Bethel affiliated with the Western District Conference in 1947, the same year that Bethel Church of Inman, Kansas, Neufeld's home church, joined.

The German language was used extensively in the services. Daily Vacation Bible School was part English, and German was taught. The congregation never grew beyond about twenty-five members. The main force holding the church together was its pastor.

Neufeld's retirement in 1955 left the church without a pastor for nearly two years. Albert Unruh of the Grace church was invited to come and preach. He related well to the Bethel members. In 1958, an impending merger of the Grace Mennonite and the Bethel Mennonite churches was announced by the Western District Conference. Sixteen members of the Bethel congregation joined the Grace church in 1959. The remaining members joined elsewhere. The church property was purchased from the Western District Home Mission Committee. The church building is now being used as a residence.

Trinity United Presbyterian Mennonite of Oklahoma City

The Trinity United Presbyterian Mennonite Church of Oklahoma City has its roots in an earlier mission venture by the Western District Home Mission Committee followed by another effort together with the Church Workers Committee of the Oklahoma Convention and the Mennonite Brethren church to form a church. Jacob B. Krause was pastor of this latter group. Starting in the 1950s, the work ceased in 1960 when the Mennonite Brethren element withdrew to form their own church.⁸⁴

In 1964, the Western District Home Mission Committee, together with the General Conference boards of Christian Service and Missions, asked O'Ray and Edith Graber to serve in a mission project in Oklahoma City. The goal was to establish a church, develop a ministry in an interracial community, and render service and outreach in the community.⁸⁵

The Grabers began their ministry in 1965 and were later aided by Donald and Elvira Schierling. A Church Center was established at 504 NE Sixteenth Street, close to commercial, medical, and govern-

84. Haury, p. 322.

85. "Oklahoma City History." Unpublished paper at MLA.

mental areas of the city. Sunday morning worship services were started in 1966.

A voluntary service unit was started. The unit worked with disadvantaged children, in a fresh-air program, hospitals, education, and employment training and home repair service. Their worship and work was in close connection with the Trinity United Presbyterian Church for several years. In 1968, Stan and Marlene Smucker came as a new part of the team ministry.

The Mennonite group merged January 3, 1971, with the Trinity church. This was brought about through the cooperation of the Western District Home Mission Committee and the Washita (now called Indian Nations) Presbytery. James DeFriend, Presbyterian, and Stan Smucker, Mennonite, were the congregation's leaders. The name of the union was the Trinity United Presbyterian Mennonite Church of Oklahoma City. In 1973 the membership was 249. Lael Smith became a pastor there in 1979.

The church union dissolved June 12, 1980, citing internal difficulties over benevolences, the voluntary service unit, and inability to coordinate styles of church polity.⁸⁶ A voluntary service unit still operates at the Church Center.

Fellowship of the New Creation, Tulsa

In February 1983, nineteen persons from General Conference, Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church, and other denominations met to explore a possible new congregation in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Worship services began March 6, 1983, in the City of Faith Hospital auditorium with twenty-eight present in the morning and over eighty in the afternoon. The new congregation then met in the suburb of Jenks, naming itself the Fellowship of the New Creation.

The early leaders were John M. Miller, professor of missions in the Oral Roberts University school of theology, and Michael Kelly, a seminary student. Kelly resigned in November 1983.

A chartering service was held March 4, 1984, with eighteen persons signing a membership covenant committing themselves to living out the New Testament definition of the church in faith and practice.⁸⁷ The Fellowship became dually affiliated with both the Western District in 1984 and the South Central Conference. From September 1985 through March 1986, Doris Miller served with her

86. "Western District dissolves union with Presbyterian church," *The Mennonite*, (July 22, 1980), p. 444.

87. "Fellowship of the New Creation Covenant," from the files at MLA. Other information for this group was taken from these same files.

husband as co-pastor.

Ray Bouchard was licensed from the church on April 8, 1984, to serve as a missionary in Maine with his wife Susanne.

Formal meetings were discontinued during the summer of 1986. Some of the causes of closure were proposed transition in leadership, some moving away, personal needs of members, and inability to draw area Mennonites. A final church business meeting was held July 17, 1986, to dispose of the assets of the church.

5. Customs and convictions in the churches

Wilma McKee

Our actions are based on our beliefs, attitudes, and values. What were the cherished values of early Mennonites in Meno who left Russia with landless experience. It was also true for the Herold Mennonites of Cordell most of whom came from the Great Trek.

Hunger for land and community

One value was land. They had a prevailing hunger for land. This was true for the Polish Mennonites in Meno who left Russia with landless experience. It was also true for the Herold Mennonites of Cordell most of whom came from the Great Trek.

What were the prized beliefs which made worshipping together in homes and rural schoolhouses a necessity equal to or above food and clothing? They believed the only way to preserve their Mennonite faith was to gather regularly for worship.

August Schmidt writes in the *Seventy-fifth Anniversary History* of the New Hopedale Mennonite Church of Meno: "Traditionally Mennonite people have been careful in the assembling of themselves to maintain their heritage and to train their children in Biblical Faith."¹

Leonard Harms, Herold church, Cordell, writes that in the early years there was a feeling that Mennonites were a special people, called out by God, a bit like the children of Israel. Along with this

1. August Schmidt, *Seventy-Fifth Anniversary History*, New Hopedale Mennonite, Meno.

was the belief that they should generally be separated from other people.²

The preserving of the Mennonite faith was highly valued. John J. Voth, Eden church, Inola, remembers clearly a discussion his parents had over the choice of staying in Syracuse, Kansas, or moving to Oklahoma. Other Mennonite families originally from Inman and Alexanderwohl communities had left because of drought and the church had been abandoned. Only one other Mennonite family remained. Voth writes, "Should they leave or stay? My father had gone into the cattle business. Mother suggested that there was a Baptist church in Syracuse, seven miles from where we lived. I remember Dad's answer: 'Yes, but what will become of the children?'"³

Another strongly held belief was that of giving aid when needed within the church community. The harshness of frontier life deepened and brought increased value to both of these beliefs.

Finding a place to worship

Oklahoma Mennonites met first in homes. New Hopedale, Meno, was organized in the basement of a home. Herold Mennonites met first in Shelly in the large home of Missionary H. W. Kliwer. Sunday mornings the white people worshiped and Sunday afternoons the Indians. Geary settlers met in the barn loft on the Jacob S. Krehbiel farm. Later they used a building furnished by Christian Krehbiel which was given for missionary work among the Indians.⁴

Almost without exception, the second step in finding a meeting place was a rural schoolhouse. Most districts seemed generous with the use of their school buildings. Only Greenfield, near Carnegie, experienced problems when they were accused of using school materials, causing them to return to meeting in homes.

And a place to bury

Most Oklahoma Mennonite churches were given land for cemeteries and church buildings by members or pastors. Sometimes a love gift was given the donor as part of the transaction.

Herold's cemetery was established at the time of the building of the church and the first stone is dated 1896.⁵ Saron, Orienta, used a cemetery which was open to other than Mennonites from the begin-

2. Letter to author from Leonard Harms, Herold Mennonite Church, Cordell, February 2, 1987.

3. Letter to author from John J. Voth, Eden Mennonite Church, Inola, February 26, 1987.

4. For additional details see the individual church histories in chapter 2.

5. Interview with History Committee of Herold Mennonite Church, Cordell, Otto Nickel, Leonard Harms, John Sprunger, pastor.

ning. The Mennonites were buried in one corner. At present, they maintain the cemetery which is called Saron Mennonite Cemetery and sell lots to nonmembers.⁶ First Mennonite, Geary, purchased one section from the town burial grounds when the town began in 1898. Deer Creek congregation organized a cemetery committee with the Methodist church in 1902. The land was donated by a Methodist with the provision that it must always be free. Later a Mennonite gave extra land adjoining the cemetery. Deer Creek members see this as an example of working together with another denomination and also providing a service to the community.⁷

The two younger Oklahoma Mennonite churches did not set up cemeteries. Grace, Enid, uses the New Hopedale cemetery since many Grace members have roots in the Meno church.⁸ First, Clinton, acquired their cemetery in 1970 from former Bergthal church members.⁹ Most Oklahoma churches regard their cemeteries as sacred places. Some, such as Bethel at Hydro, have special congregational gatherings in the cemetery for cleanup or for programs where the history of former members is told to the children.¹⁰

Building houses of worship

Early church buildings of the Oklahoma Mennonite congregations were usually simple and modest. A large room or sanctuary was considered the main part. Any Sunday school classrooms or storage space was almost accidental. The New Hopedale Church, Meno, built in 1914, was considered large and more formal. The Herold church building was patterned after it in 1915.

Two church buildings have been destroyed by fire. Saron's building burned in 1940 from unexplained causes. Eden's (Inola) building was burned in 1918 by an arsonist. The Eden congregation then moved into a barn on the G. J. Voth farm. It too was burned the first part of September of the same year.¹¹

Most of the churches have built new church buildings as needed, often adding Sunday school rooms, basements, and fellowship halls.

6. Interview with History Committee of Saron Mennonite Church, Orienta, Elmer and Carolyn Franz, M. Henry and Elsie Koehn, Arnold Curby, pastor.

7. Interview with Deer Creek Mennonite Church History Committee, Deer Creek, Marvin Dester, Elsie Letscher, Marie Krehbiel, with Robert Coon and Wilma McKee.

8. Interview with Grace Mennonite Church History Committee, Enid, Nina Unruh, Carolyn Froese, Wesley Kroeker, Myrtle Becker, Minnie Unruh, and Wilfred Ulrich, pastor, with Robert Coon and Wilma McKee.

9. Interview (written) with History Committee of First Mennonite Church, Clinton, Leonard Abrahams, Ewald Schmidt, Jake Klassen and Chris Atkins, pastor.

10. Interview with History Committee of Bethel Mennonite Church, Hydro, Beverly Glasscock and Susie Thiessen with author and Dean Kroeker.

11. John J. Voth, letter.

Some have remodeled or added to the first structure. Most raised the money or a percentage of it before they began. There is a sense of pride in paying as the building is taking place or soon after the dedication. Turpin Mennonite had their building paid for within a year after completion. Deer Creek, Turpin, and First Mennonite, Clinton, were built largely by volunteer labor. Often neighboring Mennonite churches contributed, as well as their own members.

Early ministers chosen to lead

Many Oklahoma churches feel a lasting loyalty to a first minister, chosen out of their congregation by lot or by vote. Often they served for many years without pay. The organization of the church, its very life and structure for worship and witness, depended almost solely on them. Leonard Harms, Cordell, says: "They were chosen because they were outstanding among their fellow members and because of their sincerity. They had almost complete authority in the church."¹²

Such men included: Henry Riesen, Gotebo, who also was the first elder of the Carnegie church; Michael Klaassen, Jacob Klaassen, and Jacob Jantzen, who between them pastored the Herold church for forty-two years; Gerhard Dyck and Pete Nachtigall, Bethel, Hydro; Elder Johann Ratzlaff, New Hopedale, Meno; and Christian Ramseier and D. D. Lohrentz, Saron, Orienta.

Ramseier contributed years in itinerant ministry to Oklahoma churches under the Western District Conference. Lohrentz ministered to the Saron church for the first three decades of the twentieth century. Elder Ratzlaff, in serving the New Hopedale church, also served the members who met separately north of Ringwood and who were referred to as West New Hopedale.¹³ They are now a separate church. Tobias Unruh served as their resident minister.

In Turpin, Jacob Dirks, chosen from the early settlers, served for ten years. In Medford, A. J. Gaede was elected out of the congregation and served the church for nineteen years. In Geary, Jacob S. Krehbiel was the dedicated minister of the Geary congregation for twenty-four years, and also helped in neighboring churches where he ministered regularly, officiating at baptisms and communions. In Eden, Inola, George B. Regier, chosen by lot, was the first minister.

These men supported their families by jobs or farming. Speaking of Johann Ratzlaff, Mrs. John Schmidt tells of one time when he was given a fifty-dollar love gift from the church. He was so overcome, he

12. Harms, letter.

13. Letter from Mrs. Malinda Johnson, West New Hopedale Mennonite Church, Ringwood, May 15, 1987.

could not speak, as tears streamed down his face.¹⁴ Some first ministers were formally educated in Russia, and some had only third grade education. They were supportive of the Western District Conference, often calling on the Conference committees to help settle disputes or for other needs.

They were not involved in community affairs as a rule, but were willing to go many extra miles for small groups of Mennonites who did not have a minister. The exception to community involvement is First Mennonite, Geary, where almost from the first, Krehbiel was a recognized leader in the community, and Deer Creek Mennonite, also a town church, where the minister held a part-time job and where a long history exists of cooperation with churches of other denominations.

Rituals of the Christian life

In early church services, the sermon was clearly considered of first importance. The minister or leader chose a text and preached for an hour in the German language without notes. Books of prepared sermons like the *Hoffaker* were also used.

Next to the office of minister was that of the deacon. Some churches like Bethel, Hydro, had a church father who was elected and served in place of deacon. Another important leader was the *Vorsänger* who was also elected from the congregation. The *Vorsänger* led the singing during worship and, in the absence of musical instruments, set the time of the music. In some churches, he read a line of the hymn ("lined it") before the congregation sang it.

Because most of the early ministers in Oklahoma were not elders, they did not perform baptisms, communion, or ordination. The visit of an elder to the church was an important occasion. Older church members often say with great fondness, "I was baptized by Rev. Krehbiel or Riesen or Flaming." Oklahoma churches were bound closely together by these visits. Communion and baptisms were regulated also by how often elders could come and so were usually scheduled only once a year with the date carefully recorded in the church record book.

Most churches had a time of preparation first. Some like Herold had Preparation Sunday a week before communion. Medford, New Hopedale, and Herold used wine until Prohibition in 1918. Others like Turpin, Eden, and Bethel used grape juice from the first. Most churches used one cup for communion until the early 1940s; though Deer Creek used two cups, one for men and one for women, and

14. Mrs. John Smith, "History of the New Hopedale Church," Meno.

members came to the front for communion. First, Geary, changed to individual cups quite early because of the scare of tuberculosis among the Indians.

By now all Oklahoma churches use individual cups. Communion is commonly observed now two to four times a year. Clinton's history committee says: "It is a special observance to our members, a very solemn and worshipful occasion."¹⁵

Leonard Harms says that, in Herold, communion is open to anyone who professes to be a Christian, especially to guests.¹⁶ This is true of all the churches. Bethel, Hydro, began the custom of a Good Friday evening communion service in 1962. With creative programming, it has become a special service.¹⁷

Foot washing usually followed communion in the early years. It was the cause of many church discussions and quarrels. For some reason, the practice sometimes fostered spiritual pride. Possibly earliest to discontinue foot washing was Bethel, Hydro. In 1917, one family withdrew their membership because of friction caused by foot washing and the church discontinued the practice in 1926. Most other churches continued foot washing until the 1940s or 1950s. Greenfield, Carnegie, stopped foot washing in 1947 but continued to discuss it in Bible classes in 1951, 1954, and 1955, unable to arrive at full satisfaction for all members.¹⁸ After 1947, Medford decided to have two communion services, one with foot washing and one without.¹⁹ Grace, Enid, observed foot washing into the 1950s. Those who wanted to take part sat on a different side. This made for division and pride entered in. Albert Unruh, pastor, felt foot washing was not a part of communion and the practice was discontinued. Deer Creek Mennonite Church never practiced foot washing. Eden, Inola, did not drop the custom until 1960 and reinstated it in the 1970s. Twice a year communion is an evening service and those wishing to take part in foot washing come a half hour early. About one-third of the members take part, with older members having more appreciation for it. Herold, Cordell, state they are still open to practice foot washing for any member who so desires, but it has not been requested since the 1940s.²⁰

Oklahoma churches are almost in total agreement on forms of

15. First, Clinton, History Committee, written interview.

16. Harms, letter.

17. Bethel, Hydro, History Committee, interview.

18. Interview with History Committee of Greenfield Mennonite Church, Carnegie, Mrs. Lavern Unruh, Mrs. Leo Nightingale, Mrs. Alvin Unruh.

19. Interview (written) with Walter Regier, pastor of Medford Mennonite Church, Medford, with Robert Coon.

20. Herold, Cordell, History Committee, interview.

baptism. All use pouring or sprinkling and all will immerse if it is requested. In New Hopedale, Meno, one early minister, David Schmidt, left the church and joined a Mennonite Brethren church because he believed so strongly in immersion.²¹ In Eden, Inola, one minister, Solomon Mouttet, wanted the church to accept immersion as its only form of baptism.²²

The age of baptism has become younger in many Oklahoma churches. In the early years it was usually seventeen to twenty or as in Greenfield, Carnegie, even the early twenties. Now a few are baptized at twelve years, though most are baptized between the ages of fourteen to sixteen. Most Oklahoma churches accept any form of baptism on confession of faith by new members.

All churches expect new members to take catechism instruction, though some give it after baptism. All Oklahoma churches do not emphasize the same points in catechism instruction. Some present doctrines of Christian faith with emphasis on how to give a testimony. Others, in addition to presenting the Christian faith, present Mennonite heritage and history, including peace and mutual aid.

In the early years, catechism was sometimes a part of the worship service, using a question and answer method with the answers memorized and given in unison. John J. Voth, Inola, says: "There was no time given for the baptismal candidate to give an open testimony. The church appointed a date to meet with candidates for examining. At this meeting, a few questions were asked. After hearing the answers, the church was to recommend or withhold baptism. I cannot remember that at any time baptism was withheld."²³ Many older persons remember their catechism instruction which they were encouraged to take two or three times, as being vital to their Christian experience. John A. Entz, Hydro, still remembers the Scriptures memorized and the discussions about being a Christian, which the class had with Elder J. S. Krehbiel from Geary.²⁴

Many parents helped with the nurturing of their children in the Christian faith. Memorizing Scripture, prayer time with a parent, studying Sunday school lessons with their mothers were all given in interviews with older members of the Bethel Mennonite Church, Hydro, as their strongest help in becoming a Christian. Helena Thiessen Dick, Hydro, says: "When I was a little girl, my mom took

21. Interview of History Committee of New Hopedale Mennonite Church, Meno, Mrs. Helen Ratzlaff, H. H. Unruh, Walter Unruh, and John Voth, pastor, with Dean Kroeker and Wilma McKee.

22. Interview with Dean Kroeker, Inola, July 1986.

23. Voth, interview.

24. John A. Entz, Hydro, interview, May 1987.

me by the hand and by her side she taught me to pray.”²⁵ Over and over, older Christians say, they were nurtured by home and church.

Decisions for Christ at present are made in a variety of ways, depending in part on whether the church has revivals and uses altar calls. Herold, Cordell, Eden, Inola, Turpin, and Grace, Enid, mention revival services. Herold says when the first speaker at a revival, Elmer Neuenschwander, in 1931 gave an altar call, it caused quite a stir of controversy in their church.²⁶ Other churches which refer to spiritual nurture meetings are New Hopedale, Meno, Bethel, Hydro, Greenfield, Carnegie; though earlier Greenfield and Deer Creek had revivals. Spiritual times mentioned by youth for decision making are retreat, Sunday school, vacation Bible school, the home, catechism class, and revival meetings.

Singing songs of praise

Music in early Oklahoma churches was without instruments. The *Vorsänger's* role and importance has been mentioned before. Some churches had singing schools where the solfeggio method was taught. J. J. Ratzlaff taught such a school in New Hopedale, Meno. People attended from miles away even though travel was difficult.²⁷

From 1915 through the early 1920s, reed organs were introduced into the churches, followed by pianos and other instruments. As English came into the churches so did hymnbooks which emphasized only gospel songs. Later, some Oklahoma churches began to use the *Mennonite Hymnary*. Among these are New Hopedale, Meno; First, Geary; Bethel, Hydro; Turpin; and Deer Creek. Oklahoma churches continue to use more gospel songs compared to other Mennonite churches. Some members seem resistant to learning new hymns. There are ample musical gifts, but somehow interest in learning to read music and therefore in learning new hymns, is missing.

Deer Creek church had a trained choir director in early years, coupled with adult and junior choirs. The high point for music in their church was the late 1930s and through the 1940s.²⁸

Most Oklahoma churches use a variety of special music: anthems, hymns, gospel songs, choruses, psalms, and contemporary Christian music. Some taped accompaniment is used now. Groups are also varied from mixed choirs to men's choruses, smaller groups, and children's choirs.

25. Wilma McKee, Valeta Lee, Roy Dick, Grant Noll, pastor, *Seventy-Fifth Anniversary History of Bethel Mennonite Church* (Hydro, 1981), p. 21.

26. Herold, Cordell, History Committee, interview.

27. *History of the West New Hopedale Church*, Ringwood, fiftieth anniversary, April 3, 1960.

28. Deer Creek History Committee, interview.

People who learned only gospel songs when they were children seem to appreciate them and miss them when they are absent. The same is true for those who have learned to value the hymns of our Mennonite faith. To them the gospel hymns often seem shallow. Some Oklahoma churches realize the importance of balance and attempt to use varied types of music in the same worship service.

The order of worship in Oklahoma churches is varied and often reflects the taste and education of the minister. It is usually well ordered, but the warmth and personality of the small church is noticeable. Much use of liturgical ritual and use of creeds is suspect by many, though, even within the individual church, members differ in the amount of formality or informality with which they are comfortable. First, Clinton, describes their worship as characterized by reverence, quietness, meditation, and reflection, but feels more self-expression has been encouraged and has increased over the years.²⁹

Oklahoma Mennonites have their share of rituals, some of which change slowly and others not at all. In the early years, rituals were often connected with communion. In Turpin, and in other churches as well, the members carried white handkerchiefs for communion. In Eden, Inola, and Turpin, they used the handkerchief to wipe the mouth of the cup from which all drank. In Herold, Cordell, people never touched the bread, which was placed on the handkerchief by the minister. In Eden, a loin cloth was used at communion and was put on in a certain manner around the waist and over the shoulder to indicate servanthood. In Turpin, many of the women would wear a scarf or other covering for communion.

In other churches, rituals were tied in with the time and way in which the right hand of fellowship was given after baptism. Today's rituals are just as jealously protected, though we smile at those of yesterday.

Ways of witness in the churches

Three areas are mentioned in any discussion of witnessing in the first twenty-five years of the Oklahoma Mennonite churches. The first was the gathering together for worship. Second was the training of children through the Sunday school where the children received instruction from the *Fiebel* and the German schools which were often taught in homes. Michael Klaassen, Herold, taught a three-month German school from 1902 on, which was attended by a few non-Mennonites.³⁰ Elder Heinrich Riesen conducted a German-English

29. First, Clinton, History Committee, interview.

30. John W. Arn, *The Herold Mennonite Church Seventy-Fifth Anniversary, 1899-1969* (North Newton: Mennonite Press, 1969), pp. 37-43.



Henry Riesen spoke for the preparatory school as a necessary way to preserve the German language: *graduating class at Gotebo.*

Preparatory School in his home in Gotebo and in 1911 the New Hopedale church, Meno, organized the Meno Preparatory School.³¹ The third witness was a quiet, consistent living out of the Mennonite beliefs with an emphasis on biblical teaching.

The most notable exception to this pattern of witness was First Mennonite, Geary. J. S. Krehbiel, their minister, was superintendent of the Indian Mission at Darlington. From the first, their witness was threefold: witness to the Indians with services every two weeks (three of their charter members were Indians), witness to the Mennonite settlers, and witness to the town of Geary, with a union Sunday school in 1898.³²

Special holidays as witness

One witness to the surrounding communities was the central place of the church in the observance of holidays. Ascension and Pentecost were two-day observances. John A. Entz, Hydro, remembers going with his father to gather white soap weeds to decorate the windows in the church on Ascension Day.³³

31. Arn, p. 45.

32. Interview of History Committee of First Mennonite Church, Geary, Kent Ruth, and Helen Lehmann.

33. John A. Entz, interview.

The celebration most consistently mentioned among Oklahoma churches and honored as a continuing one today is the Christmas Eve service. From earliest times, when settlers met together in homes and schoolhouses, they arranged special services on Christmas Eve. In some churches, children, youth, and adults work weeks ahead on a program. Always people describe the evening with its huge candle-lit tree and its program as impressive. Often visitors from the community and members who had moved away or no longer attended came for this service, and still do today. Most churches gave sacks of treats (candy, nuts, and fruit) to the children or to all attending. In some Oklahoma churches this practice of treats continues.

Children's Day started a few years later, and with its program and various activities has been a part of Oklahoma Mennonite witness.

Weekly services as witness

Regular Sunday morning services (Sunday school and worship) came first as a witness to the community. In Turpin and Deer Creek, Sunday school preceded worship services. From 1912 to 1917, the first Christian Endeavors (C.E.) were started.

Herold church gives credit to Marie J. Jantzen who was attending Gotebo Preparatory School for bringing the idea to the Herold church. The C.E.'s were often organized by the youth and at Bethel, Hydro, youth even paid dues. The C.E. was a breakthrough in allowing youth a voice in church. In Medford C.E., a band was started and later special programs were given in other churches.

Schools as witness

Due to the pressures of World War I, the German schools were closed. John Arn, former pastor at Herold, says in the *Herold Mennonite Seventieth Anniversary Book*, "this (closing of German schools) seemed to be a great loss to the church, because the Christian faith was no longer taught with such scholastic rigor."³⁴ Due to this loss, the Oklahoma Convention decided in 1917 to establish a school and the Meno Preparatory School became the Oklahoma Bible Academy. Within individual churches the incentive was felt to begin Daily Vacation Bible Schools. These were usually two or three weeks long and were held in summer.

Today's children received most of their formal religious training in Sunday school, daily vacation Bible school, and at summer retreats. Most Oklahoma Mennonite churches work hard at being effective in programming for their children. One of the basic beliefs of the Men-

34. Arn, p. 46.

nonite faith which is lacking in some churches is an emphasis on peace and how this teaching ties into evangelism and the Christian life.

Some youth attend Oklahoma Bible Academy, Enid, and a few attend the Mennonite Brethren Academy, Corn. Parents appreciate the Bible instruction available to them. Both schools have a conservative fundamental approach and Grace College of the Bible, Omaha, Nebraska, has had a lot of influence in the Oklahoma Bible Academy area.³⁵ Other parents choose to have their youth attend local high schools and remain at home during these years, feeling the daily influence of a Christian family is necessary in these complex times. Turpin church has been asked regularly through the years to have a member on the local school board.³⁶

A few churches promote attendance at Bethel College, Newton, Kansas, or other church-related colleges. In 1948, Deer Creek had eleven students at Bethel. But many Oklahoma youth go to state universities, many of which are conveniently located near their homes.

Other types of witness

Perhaps the most consistent mission workers in the Oklahoma churches from as early as 1906 in some churches were the women's mission societies. Returning missionaries prepared lists of needs and often the women based their work on these.

Youth groups as such were organized in the 1960s and some churches have a Young Mission Worker program for the children. First, Clinton, has an Awana program and an annual Awana banquet.³⁷ Some Oklahoma churches have a Men's Brotherhood and others have never had one.

Ministers, missionaries, volunteers, and other Christian service workers are at present a vital part of the witness of Oklahoma Mennonite churches. Linda Entz Beerwinkle, Bethel, Hydro, spent two months in voluntary service with Crossroads Community Center in North Philadelphia. Linda says, "Voluntary service for me was one of the best opportunities for growth I have known. Besides being very educational, the cross-cultural experience was invaluable."³⁸ The churches support prayerfully and financially those from their group who enter full-time service.

35. For more complete details, see chapter 8 on Oklahoma Convention.

36. Interview of History Committee of Turpin Mennonite Church, Turpin, Franzie and Leona Loepp, Paul and Sara Ediger, and Aldo and Mary Ann Becker, with Robert and Helen Coon.

37. First, Clinton, History Committee, interview.

38. Interview of Linda Entz Beerwinkle, Hydro, May 1987.

In 1927, Herold had its first series of revivals. Now most churches have a Harvest Mission Festival and some also take part in union Thanksgiving services. Spring meetings are held, too. As mentioned before, for some churches, this is a revival meeting and for some a spiritual nurture emphasis is given.

In 1946, the West New Hopedale church's decision to become a separate organization was sparked by its members' desire to be a better witness in their home community of Ringwood. Their wish to have their own mission program and outreach led them to plan a yearly conference on foreign and home missions. In early years, they had asked the Back to the Bible organization for advice in witnessing. Encouraged by Rudolph Toews, they took part in Child Evangelism programs and have a Good News Club at present.³⁹

First, Clinton, and also other churches have from time to time taken part in visitation programs, but without great results. Palmer Becker spent a great deal of time one year visiting each new family who came to Clinton, but there was little response. He felt new members came through family and friendship ties.⁴⁰

Oklahoma Mennonite witness to the Indians has been, at best, sporadic. Efforts have been made but not always consistently. Deer Creek members have worked at Cantonment. Pastor H. B. Schmidt and the youth group worked at Seiling and in recent years Robert and Helen Coon have participated in Indian activities. Some of this interest for Deer Creek may have come from some of their members being relatives of S. S. Haury, Indian missionary.⁴¹

Medford Mennonite Church was involved in a building project at Hammon and purchased a tractor for the church. Grace, Enid, has had members teach Bible school in Clinton. These are examples of a number of types of witness among the Indian churches.

Deer Creek lists its main witness as voluntary service in times of storm and sickness. They also value opportunities to share their peace witness.⁴² Turpin built some of the Liberal church and parsonage in voluntary service and have several times shared pastors with Liberal.⁴³

In 1980, Bethel, Hydro, began a work called Sol-N-Amor (Serving Oklahoma Laborers in Love) with undocumented Mexican workers and also Bible and English classes for adults and children were held for four years for General Conference Mennonites from Mexico. In

39. "History of the West New Hopedale Mennonite Church," Ringwood, February 24, 1985.

40. Letter of Palmer Becker to author, October 15, 1986.

41. Deer Creek History Committee, interview.

42. Deer Creek History Committee, interview.

43. Turpin History Committee, interview.

1982, together with a neighboring Mennonite Church (Pleasant View), they purchased the Maple Lawn Manor Nursing Home.⁴⁴

Norman Unruh, Enid, says, "Grace Mennonite has worked at being a witness to the local community around the church. The location of the church is becoming more of a rental transit community with lower incomes. The church really has a challenge in that witness."⁴⁵ The Grace congregation has been a melting pot. Its membership comes from more than thirty congregations with the highest number of members from non-Mennonite background of any church in the Western District. Their history committee says they used to think of themselves as a mission church and therefore poor. Now that they have a mission outreach their outlook has changed.⁴⁶

One notices that, to Oklahoma Mennonites, evangelism is important, although the methods used differ widely among the churches. Some use a verbal approach, placing relationships in second place; others emphasize "living your faith" and are perhaps hesitant in expressing their beliefs. A third approach holds that we are a witness in every part of our lives and that a witness statement must combine words, actions, and respect for the person being witnessed to in order to be effective.

John J. Voth, Inola, says, "There are those in our group that take the fact of being a witness to heart, in that they recognize two forms of witnessing: that of word of mouth and that witness that is demonstrated by a careful life. In fact, we have some people that have said they were convicted by the life and testimony of our people."⁴⁷

Many changes through the years

The most significant change in Oklahoma Mennonite history came when English took the place of German. It did not happen easily. Many other changes were involved within this large one, not the least of which was the gradual movement of Mennonites into the mainstream of the surrounding culture. For a minority people, this had many consequences.

Bethel, Hydro, had difficulty accepting its first Young People's class taught in English in 1918 by B. H. Thiessen. Half of the sermons at Bethel continued in German until 1933. First, Geary, was probably the first to make the language change in 1918. Deer Creek began using English in 1922 and used it completely by the 1930s. Inola made the changeover in the 1930s and 1940s. Medford used

44. Bethel, Hydro, History Committee, interview.

45. Norman Unruh, Enid, Oklahoma, interview, June 1987.

46. Grace, Enid, History Committee, interview.

47. Voth, letter.

English hymns and sermons partly during World War I and then returned to the German until the late 1920s. Greenfield, Carnegie, say their problems came when German school stopped and German preaching continued. The youth lost out. During the time of the formation of the Grace Mennonite Church, Enid, a difference of opinion arose over whether to use the English conference material for Sunday school classes or, as H. T. Neufeld, the pastor, insisted, only German material. The disagreement was so severe that some members withdrew and established the Bethel Mennonite Church on 4th Street in Enid in 1937.⁴⁸

Most Oklahoma churches were in a process of change from the end of World War I until mid or late 1930s. Herold held on the longest, not beginning to use English in church services until 1941 and not using it completely until 1946.⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that already in 1899, Christian Ramseier, Orienta pastor, had suggested to the Western District Conference that it would now be effective for Oklahoma Mennonites to learn English.⁵⁰

Customs like seating arrangements and adult class divisions changed following the language. Bethel, Hydro, men and women began to have classes together in the late 1930s and by 1940 the oldest and most conservative class elected a woman teacher, Mrs. Lena Ewy, who held this position for many years. In Orienta, the men sat on one side and women on the other until the late 1940s when the young marrieds began to sit together. Eden, Inola, sat apart until the 1950s and then families began to sit together.

Discipline strict in the early years

Another area of change has been discipline. One type of discipline, that of patterning in church, Sunday school, and Sunday evening attendance, has remained quite strong in Oklahoma churches. As a whole, families go as a unit. They do not take their children to Sunday school and leave, nor do the women take total church responsibility for the family.

Other church discipline as related to the use of alcohol and tobacco, divorce and remarriage, and all worldliness was handled strictly in the early years. Herold mentions members being "canceled" for these reasons and some confessed before the church. Greenfield's first constitution clearly and concisely sets out Scriptures and methods with which sin and sinner are to be dealt.⁵¹

48. Grace, Enid, History Committee, interview.

49. Herold, Cordell, History Committee, interview.

50. Western District Conference minutes, 1899, from report of Christian Ramseier.

51. Greenfield, Carnegie, History Committee, interview.

Most churches remember incidents of strict discipline being used. There is often shame for some of these events because from today's viewpoint the discipline seems unloving. A result has been in some cases an avoidance of all discipline. Most churches have difficulty arriving at what a balance should be. There is no one opinion.

Eden, Inola, has revised their constitution on the subject of divorce. It says, in effect, divorce is recognized as sin but the church stands ready to assist the parties involved and will receive divorced persons into its membership when repentant and indicating a sincere commitment to a new life in Christ.⁵²

Another example of early discipline and authority is shown from an incident in the Bethel church, Hydro. A quarrel between two members was solved by the church being cleared by the pastor and the door locked. Standing outside the house of God, they had to ask forgiveness, reconcile, and then everyone could again enter the church and proceed with the meeting.⁵³ One questions if today's church would accept such authority.

The place of youth in the churches has certainly changed. In the early church, youth were not permitted to join in discussions. Now their input is welcomed and youth groups often conduct worship services or give programs for the entire church.

New appreciation for the gifts of women

Gifts of people of all ages are much more readily accepted and valued. This is true particularly for women. In Enid, the door was opened to women by choosing married couples to serve as deacon couples. Now women are elected for their own abilities. This is a big change from women not being allowed to vote.

Most churches had to amend their constitutions to give women the right to vote. Bethel, Hydro, did this in 1933, though women were always allowed to vote in Sunday school elections. Meno granted the vote earlier, in 1920. Herold, while "granting them permission" to organize for Ladies Mission Society in 1906 and asking them to contribute to the church in 1931, did not permit women to vote for the calling of a pastor until 1940, nor were they formally permitted to come to the annual meetings and take part until 1943.⁵⁴

While women hold many positions in Oklahoma churches and in some churches their gifts determine their service, most Oklahoma churches have some small stronghold where service is only allowed to men. Often this is not a written rule but a custom which remains

52. Voth, letter.

53. Bethel, Hydro, *Sevent-fifth Anniversary Book*, p. 5.

54. Arn, p. 18.

because “we always do it this way.” No women are serving as pastors in Oklahoma churches, but some churches show willingness to have women as speakers at special services. On the other end of the spectrum are some churches who disagree strongly on women being in the ministry.

In the early churches, dues were often used to pay local expenses and several groups used land assessments also where a person paid a certain amount per acreage of land owned. New Hopedale, Meno, is the only church which still has dues and here too it has become a token gift. The giving pattern has changed and has increased as costs have gone up. Some Oklahoma churches give mostly to conference-approved causes, while others choose various projects and do not give through the conference. Most giving is by freewill offerings.

One of the important changes has been the choosing of ministers. Now ministers are not chosen from the local church and they are paid a salary. Usually they “try out” in a series of services and then the church votes to give or not to give a call. A number of Oklahoma churches have relied heavily on the conference minister for available pastoral candidates. Others prefer to choose ministers by other methods. In Saron, Orienta, H. P. Fast chose the minister who followed him, and that minister in turn suggested the next minister when he was ready to leave.⁵⁵

Pastors today are formally educated. They usually use notes and sermons are more organized in presentation. Sermons are biblically based and contemporary thought is often included, but some Oklahoma Mennonites are skeptical of social issues being discussed from the pulpit.

Western District Conference helped with the support of some early ministers as in the case of Rudolph Schmidt in Greenfield and Turpin. Schmidt, who was paid seventy dollars a month by the Conference and served both Turpin and Montezuma at the same time, once returned money he did not use to the Conference.

First, Clinton, was served by students from Bethel College. One of them, Henry D. Penner, became their pastor. Grace’s pastor was paid at first by the Conference. Later the church chose to pay back the money to the Conference.⁵⁶ Turpin and Deer Creek also have had students from Bethel College serve them.

The changeover to the paid ministry was a difficult one for some Oklahoma Mennonites. It involved a different kind of thinking, but eventually it came. Many of the first ministers to be paid received

55. A. C. Siebert, *Sixtieth Anniversary of the Saron Mennonite Church*, November 30, 1958.

56. Grace, Enid, History Committee, interview.

five dollars a Sunday. In the Herold church, when C. B. Friesen taught school, some complained because the minister was working on their time. When John R. Duerksen came to Herold, they paid him fifty dollars a month. He worked also for a farmer and offered to give the money he earned to the church, but the treasurer refused to accept it.⁵⁷ These are not isolated incidents. They serve as an example of the struggle to the paid ministry.

Many of the changes in custom came to a church with a new minister. Also a change in attitude toward church college, Western District Conference, and General Conference came with a minister who had previous hard feelings toward the Conference. The opposite was true of the minister who was loyal to the Conference. The size of congregation does influence the minister chosen. At times this has had adverse effects, but in other circumstances can and does work for good. Young ministers willing to come to a small church for their first pastorates often develop close relationships with the youth. Roy Entz, who grew up in the Bethel, Hydro, congregation and has been an active participant in the Methodist church for his adult years, comments on the influence of the minister on his life as a young man in his home church. He says, "Mainly, it was because he cared about me in those sensitive years. I have never at any time in my life wanted to give up regular church attendance. I think that may go back to a really great minister at an early age."⁵⁸

Basic Christian beliefs may not have changed in Oklahoma churches, but many other changes have come. Members now have a great deal more formal education, farming is only one of many vocations, materialism is on the increase, and the values of the surrounding culture are gradually being accepted.

Sometimes the church which is isolated from other General Conference churches will develop a closeness from shared life experiences which brings joy into the lives of its members and which is greatly valued. At the same time, these churches would often benefit from exposure to the larger Mennonite church in order to promote the growth which comes from sharing insights and strengths.

Pressures from the outside left their mark

Early Oklahoma Mennonites were daily reminded that they were a minority. They were not able to share with English-speaking neighbors and not even sure they should share, since their neighbors were so different and often seemed to be "of the world."

57. Herold, Cordell, History Committee, interview.

58. Letter of Roy Entz, Muskogee, to author, February 11, 1987.

This aloneness was accentuated by separation from relatives in Kansas and other states. Oklahoma Mennonites sometimes felt they were the poor relations who had been left out of their share of land in states where other Mennonites lived in large "protected communities."⁵⁹

Living in Indian Territory was not easy. Conditions were difficult as small groups (often ten to twelve families) living within a few miles of one another experimented with how to farm their raw, undeveloped land. There was drought and crop failure. For several years, men returned to Kansas to work for wages or to borrow money from relatives.⁶⁰

In Western District Conference minutes from 1895 to 1898 are reports of help given by the Committee for Poor Relief to Mennonites in Indian Territory. Examples are: Perry received food and clothing valued at fifteen dollars, Okeene received clothing valued at five dollars and nine bushels of seed oats, and Mennoville received sixty-nine bushels of seed oats. One man was given a suit of clothes.⁶¹

Many gave up, sold their land for whatever they could get, and went in search of better opportunities. Henry Froese from the Medford church had made the run for land successfully, but he became so discouraged that he traded his land for a shotgun and went back to Kansas.⁶² For those who remained, determined to endure, the severe testing coupled with the sense of being a minority often produced strength, fierce independence, and sometimes stubborn resistance to anything or anyone who seemed to disagree with them. By 1898, the Committee for Poor Relief could report they had received no requests for financial help and one brother who had been helped years earlier, paid back fifteen dollars with sincere thanks.⁶³

The church fellowships suffered. Most groups had great diversity of background and therefore customs. Clashes and church splits were common. Lacking the cohesiveness of years of shared worship and experience, many churches were abandoned. In times of trouble, they often sent for the Western District Committee for Church Affairs to help them settle disputes. Sometimes there were expressions of gratitude and humility, but feelings against the conference as a big brother also developed and can be sensed in discussion with some older members.

One of the strongest influences on Oklahoma Mennonite churches

59. John A. Entz, interview.

60. David Haurry, *Prairie People* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981), p. 122.

61. Western District Conference minutes, 1895-1898.

62. Medford History Committee, interview.

63. Western District Conference minutes, 1898.

was World War I. Leonard Harms, Herold, says that during World War I Mennonites were held in very low esteem and even contempt. Laws were passed in Cordell which made it illegal to talk German.⁶⁴ Mennonites, even in the same church, responded in different ways to persecution. In Bethel, Hydro, some bought war bonds, some refused. Some enlisted in the army, some did not. This period of fear and turmoil left its mark on Oklahoma Mennonite churches.⁶⁵

In Turpin, someone visiting the church saw a Christian flag on display and spread a rumor that it was the Nazi flag.⁶⁶ During World War I, several Mennonite churches were asked to put up American flags which they refused to do. But fear carries a big stick and in World War II some churches did place flags in their sanctuaries. Bethel, Hydro, displayed flags (American and Christian) from 1940 to 1947; Herold placed flags in their church in the 1940s and Inola put up flags after they were burned out in 1918. In Herold, 50 percent of the congregation moved to Canada. During World War II, persecution was less severe, but anyone who registered as a conscientious objector became the object of discrimination.⁶⁷

In some Oklahoma churches, the peace stand remained strong even after the war. For other churches the stand became a partial one. Waldo Kaufman, present pastor at Liberal, Kansas, who has served both large churches, city churches, and a rural Oklahoma church, says: "Mennonite churches vary in the matter of responding to outside influences. Large congregations, with their confident bigness, seem to exert quite a lot of influence on the community. This may be good and/or bad. On the positive side, the peace position is more alive in large Mennonite churches and predominantly Mennonite communities. There seems to be power in numbers."⁶⁸

Other denominations

Most Oklahoma General Conference (GC) Mennonite churches work with other denominations in union services and in ministerial groups.

Deer Creek has had many cooperative ventures like vacation Bible school and summer services with other denominations, as has First Mennonite, Geary. On the whole, these efforts are felt to have been constructive.

The two Mennonite denominations which have influenced General

64. Harms, letter.

65. Bethel, Hydro, *Seventy-fifth Anniversary Book*, p. 8.

66. Turpin History Committee, interview.

67. For a more detailed account, see chapter 7 on nonresistance, by Robert Coon.

68. Letter from Waldo W. Kaufman, Liberal, Kansas, February 13, 1987.

Conference churches the most in Oklahoma are the Mennonite Church (MC) and the Mennonite Brethren (MB).

The Mennonite Church (Pleasant View) near Hydro has cooperated over many years with the Bethel church. The two churches have shared ministers when one pulpit was vacant, they jointly own the Maple Lawn Manor Nursing Home, and have worked together in the program for Mexican workers (Sol-N-Amor).⁶⁹

Eden, Inola, works with the Zion Mennonite Church near Pryor. They cooperate in a Scripture memory retreat each year. A few Mennonite Church youth have attended Oklahoma Mennonite retreats over the years and one young adult retreat is now a joint effort between the two conferences. The two groups seem able to respect one another's conference affiliation and whatever differences they feel are not a source of irritation but are proof of the uniqueness of each group.

A former Herold member donated land one half mile from the Herold church for a Mennonite Brethren cemetery. Some members of the Herold church left and formed a Mennonite Brethren church. In spite of this, Herold cooperates with the Mennonite Brethren church today in hymn sings and special meetings.⁷⁰

Over the years, there have been differences between the MBs and the GCs as well as efforts of cooperation. When Albert Unruh was pastor at Grace, Enid, joint communion services were held at Easter and Thanksgiving with the Mennonite Brethren church in Enid. They were good services and so well attended there was sometimes standing room only. The services were held in alternate churches with alternate pastors serving. However, the effort terminated on a bad note.⁷¹ A number of General Conference members have joined Mennonite Brethren churches and MBs have had a strong influence in recent years on the Oklahoma Bible Academy, with a large number serving on the board.

All Mennonite denominations in Oklahoma cooperate fully in the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) meat canning program, Et Cetera Shop, and the annual Oklahoma MCC Relief Sale. The work in these areas has built relationships and respect.

Oklahoma Mennonites have felt the influence of high school and colleges. Oklahoma youth even from the same church often go to several different high schools. They often receive ridicule even from teachers for any mention of the Mennonite peace beliefs. Most schools promote militarism. Another problem is in maintaining a

69. Bethel, Hydro, History Committee, interview.

70. Herold, Cordell, History Committee, interview.

71. Grace, Enid, History Committee, interview.

strong youth group within the churches, when youth are divided in interest and activities. The Oklahoma retreat program and the Oklahoma Youth Activities Committee try to combat this divisiveness.

Radio and television are a source of great influence on Oklahoma Mennonites. Larry Wilson, former minister at Grace, Enid; New Hopedale; and Bethel, Hydro, says, "I was surprised that my reading the Revised Standard Version at Enid created a stir (the devil's book), but I could better understand that reaction when I became aware of the influence of certain Tulsa radio preachers on some persons in the congregation."⁷² In recent years, the teachings of some radio and television ministers have been questioned, but such influences can be subtle.

The influence of Western District Conference

Oklahoma churches usually become members of the Western District Conference within a few years of their organization. Membership in General Conference often follows a few years later.

For most congregations, the influence of the Western District Conference was warmly felt even before church organization. Minutes of Western District Conference show clearly that a strong sense of responsibility was felt for Oklahoma churches.

In spite of distance, the Committee for Church Affairs came often to help settle disputes. Later, the Home Mission Committee was vitally involved with Carnegie in choosing pastors, and with First, Clinton, and Grace, Enid, as they began to meet in groups. Mrs. Dan Unruh, Greenfield, Carnegie, wrote in the church's fiftieth anniversary celebration on September 1, 1963, about the Home Mission Committee's support and its value to the Greenfield church.⁷³

Individual Kansas churches took responsibility for some Oklahoma churches. Many members of the Turpin Mennonite Church came from Hoffnungsau, Inman, Kansas, and when they were ready to build their own church they borrowed the money from Hoffnungsau. New Hopedale, Meno, even had a Kansas elder. Field secretaries and itinerant pastors traveled many miles with regularity to Oklahoma as a wealth of evidence found both in individual church records and Western District Conference minutes shows.

Some early pastors were trained at Bethel College. In Deer Creek, three of their first four ministers attended Bethel either before or after their ministry at Deer Creek. This was an unusual percentage for the time and continued to show in the congregation when high

72. Letter from Larry Wilson, Kidron, Ohio, February 12, 1987.

73. Mrs. Dedan Unruh, article in *Mennonite Weekly Review*, "Greenfield's Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration," 1963.

school age students went to Bethel Academy to complete high school because Deer Creek did not have a four-year program until 1916.⁷⁴

Western District Conference had a great amount of influence in various ways which in general seemed positive on Oklahoma churches within the early years.

In the 1940s, many changes came to Oklahoma churches. For certain members in some churches, this included a change in attitude toward the Western District Conference. These persons feared that the Conference was seeking to control them or force them to their way of thinking. In this viewpoint, the Conference was not seen as responsible to the churches but as “over” the churches.

Waldo Kaufman, former pastor of Bethel, Hydro, for eleven years, says he noticed when he came to Oklahoma in 1945 that Conference speakers were scarce and Bethel College choir and other musical groups from the college did not give programs often in Oklahoma churches. This was probably due to the distance and cost of travel in the 1920s and 1930s. For these same years, there were less involvements from Oklahoma churches in Western District Conference and this meant anti-Conference feelings in some churches were not sufficiently combated.⁷⁵

Influence from ministers

The largest single influence on the churches through the years seems to have been the ministers. In the early years, the first minister who structured and organized the church had a significant influence.

The all-important moment came in each church when an “outside” minister came in. If such a person was loyal to the Conference and strongly aware of the cost to our ancestors to establish the Mennonite faith, then the church seemed to grow in this direction.

John J. Voth, Inola, says: “The influence of our ministers has also played a part in isolating us from the Western District Conference. At one time there was a decided spirit against Bethel College. This feeling of opposition was an impression I got from one church where we attended, before we moved to Eden, Inola. Looking back now, it is surprising what an influence a leader can have. However, we are thankful that through all these years of growth, we have been fortunate to have had sound gospel preaching. There have been differences of opinion, but never to the point of division.”⁷⁶

74. Deer Creek History Committee, interview.

75. Kaufman, letter.

76. Voth, letter.

In interviews with B. H. Janzen, former field worker for the Western District, and Waldo Kaufman, both felt the greatest influence against the Conference in the 1940s were the ministers of some Oklahoma churches.⁷⁷

In the past few years, Western District Conference committees and Conference minister Frank Keller have worked hard to reestablish relationships which were broken with Oklahoma churches and to deepen our mutual commitment to one another.

Outside influences

Some of the outside influence on the Oklahoma Mennonite churches of today were mentioned by First, Clinton, as the economy, worldliness which creeps into the body in subtle ways, and humanism whose perspectives are often uncritically accepted by believers today through the secular media.⁷⁸ Others mentioned specifically the influence on our churches of alcoholic drink, smoking/chewing, materialism, militarism, and pleasure activities.

Issues, attitudes, and actions

The issues facing Oklahoma churches today are numerous. To a number of smaller churches, the decline in church membership, the absence of youth and children are a constant reminder of the life and death struggle in which they are involved.

First, Geary, faced with a diminished attendance, remains an active church. Members are involved in service of all kinds. Not the least of these has continued to be their freely given service to the Geary community, with one of their members, at present, the mayor. Kent Ruth, Geary, has said he feels that many have profited by the First Mennonite Church heritage and have used it in turn in other churches and in the outside world.⁷⁹

New Hopedale, Meno, lists their main issues as divorce, the economic crisis, and people who want to go to nondenominational churches.⁸⁰ Knowing how to respond to the issues raised, such as abortion, by the larger denominational meetings is an issue for Herold, Cordell.⁸¹

Roy Entz, Muskogee, mentions a much larger number of female single-parent families in the Methodist church where he is a member. One of their problems, Roy says, is keeping young adults active

77. Interview with B. H. Jantzen and Waldo Kaufman, June 1986.

78. First, Clinton, History Committee, interview.

79. Letter from Kent Ruth, Geary, February 12, 1987.

80. New Hopedale, Meno, History Committee, interview.

81. Herold, Cordell, History Committee, interview.

in church.⁸² Many Oklahoma Mennonite churches are noted for being close, cohesive groups, with both parents involved in church activities, but even so they are experiencing, for numerous reasons, the loss of too many of their young adults. Leonard Harms, Cordell, mentions the loss of interest in attending conferences or local church business meetings. Basically, he and many other concerned Christians are asking the same question, "Have we lost our 'first love'?"⁸³

Abe Krause, Bethel, Hydro, pastor says: "We do not decide whether God's kingdom work will go forward. We can only decide whether we will be a part of it. We believe God has called us to love and to live in a loving way by showing justice to all people. The issues we need to be working on have to do with honest living, integrity, more behavior respecting the rights of everyone, and being responsible (honest) in our work. Christ's mandate to his followers is that we are to 'make disciples' of all nations, and then to instruct those who have turned to Christ. This is our lifetime task."⁸⁴

Present-day positive attitudes are shown in the good representation on Western District Conference committees of Oklahoma persons and the increased openness being felt toward working with both Western District Conference and General Conference.

Within the state, vitality is experienced in the retreat program, in Oklahoma Youth Activities Committee (OKYAC), and in Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) with many youth taking part yearly in the Youth Squad. The Et Cetera Shop, Weatherford, is a witness and an avenue of service for many. The annual MCC Relief Sale is an ongoing, exciting example of cooperation, fellowship, and service.

Recent projects of the Oklahoma Convention are the Choice Books Program and the Church Planting Committee which is working with the Western District Home Mission Committee.

At the beginning of this section on basic beliefs and practices, the statement was made that our actions are based on our beliefs, attitudes, and values. The value of land, the strong beliefs of preserving the Mennonite faith, and of giving aid to those in need were given as primary for early Oklahoma Mennonites. Our attitudes today are the outcome of these beliefs, values, and the influences we have been subjected to through the years. However, we have not been helpless. They are also the outcome of how well or how poorly we have listened to God and allowed God's Spirit to work in us.

Out of these attitudes stem our actions for good or bad, toward our churches, our Conference, our communities, and toward our world.

82. Roy Entz, interview.

83. Harms, interview.

84. Abe Krause, Hydro, Oklahoma, interview, February 10, 1987.

6. Social times of true communion

Dean Kroeker

Social life for early General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma was closely woven into the fabric of the church. Others in their communities often considered them peculiar. They spoke German in their homes and churches, lived mostly in their own communities, and stayed to themselves. Therefore, exchange between church families took on great value, since they depended on the church for their main social contact.

So, the church was an important element in each settlement. Almost without exception, each community built a church early in its history. Over the centuries, they had migrated from western Europe to Russia to the United States to Ohio, Kansas, Nebraska, and other states. Now, in 1893, they were moving to Oklahoma as it was being opened to settlement for a fourth time. The desire for more land pushed them to go south. In moving from place to place, many looked for others of their faith in a community, so their families could be a part of a Mennonite group. Others simply scattered, and many lost their Mennonite identity.

The settlements at Meno, Medford, Fairview, Orienta, Lahoma, Kremlin, and others had their beginnings with the Oklahoma runs in the late 1800s.¹ The Herold community was settled after visitors to the area had reported that the land was unsuited for farming. However, an allotment of 160 acres of land was available for a ten-dollar filing fee. In the Turpin area, the price of land was sixteen dollars for a quarter section, and farmers would have to live on the

1. Dedrich L. Dalke, "Mennonite Pioneers at Enid," *Mennonite Life* (October 1956).

land for at least a year. Many times some settlers had to have naturalization papers filled out before they could file for land. Some early reports were that the land was good, but that it never rained. The Mennonite answer to this was to trust God for their needs.²

Centered in home and church

Schools were not only necessary for teaching youth the Bible, the Mennonite faith, and German language, but to be a place to socialize. By 1902, a school was started by Michael Klaassen of Cordell in his home. He taught arithmetic, reading, history, geography, church history, and hymns, all in High German. A schoolhouse was built in 1903.³ Most of the children of the early settler families attended German preparatory schools such as this.

When German was forbidden in Washita County in 1918, some of the German schools were closed. But the one-month German Bible school held after the regular seven-month school term continued until around 1925 in Sichar, Herold, Inola, and other places. At one time in the Turpin area, Mennonites did not care for the public school teachers so they withdrew from the public schools and attended German schools comprised totally of Mennonite children.⁴ German schools and German church services continued until the late 1930s and early 1940s. The German language was highly valued and had great significance socially. Youth were warned to beware of those speaking only "American." Outsiders resented this minority who clung so stubbornly to the German. Repercussions often followed.

Holidays, weddings, funerals, and reunions were times when people gathered at church to share and worship together. Christmas Eve programs were by far the most popular church gatherings and are still a tradition in most churches. The Herold church's first Christmas Eve program in 1899 lasted three hours.⁵ The most memorable events from those early programs were the live trees, usually cedar, that were decorated with real candles. Certain men were stationed near the tree with scissors to keep the candle wicks trimmed and with water to prevent fires. This prominent job seemed to always fall to the same persons year after year. In the Eden, Inola, church John Funk is the one remembered for doing this every year.⁶

2. P. M. Franz, "The History of Turpin Mennonite Church—1907-1975." Unpublished article, p. 1.

3. Herold Mennonite Church (Cordell) History Committee.

4. Turpin Mennonite Church (Turpin) History Committee.

5. Herold History Committee.

6. Eden Mennonite Church (Inola) History Committee.

This, of course, was in the days before electricity was available and as the lamps that lighted the sanctuary became dim someone would take them out, pump them up, and they were returned, restored to their normal brightness. As electricity became available, the candles on the tree were replaced with electric lights, some of the bubble type, but all wired in series. When one went out they all were out and then the job was to find the culprit.

Of course, the highlight of the Christmas Eve program for the children and some older ones as well was the Christmas sack, or treats. A brown paper bag holding different kinds of fruit, candy, assorted nuts, and other things soon became traditional.

Other memorable programs in church were the Sunday evening Christian Endeavor programs. It was at this time that the children were trained to take part in church. Many future pianists, organists, and orators appeared before their first audiences in this setting. Choir practice on Thursday night or Sunday evening was also a highlight, especially when you were privileged to ride home with a friend, or Dad trusted the family car to your driving.

Families visiting one another always brings back memories of times past. Back then, families would visit each other during the week and often have *faspa* (an evening lunch) together. On occasions such as butchering, breakfast was often served by the hosting family. Hirschler mentions in, "The Story of a Pioneer Family," how the Indians, being crowded on the reservation, were idle and entire tribes would come for visits to the early settlers' homes.⁷

Hard times in those early days

The living conditions of the early settler were meager. In the western part of the state most of the family settlements began as a result of the land being opened for homesteading. Many families took part in the public runs while others bought land from someone who had claimed the land but sold it to look for a better deal someplace else. At this time, land sold for as little as one dollar per acre. Most of the Mennonite homesteaders came from Reno, Harvey, Marion, Woodson, and Butler counties in Kansas and traveled to the region in groups.⁸

These early settlers usually built sod houses and dugouts, either because they were too poor to build a frame house or because lumber was not available in the area. Since the sod was not tightly matted,

7. Edward E. Hirschler, "The Story of a Pioneer Family." M.A. thesis, Kansas State College, Fort Hays, p. 46; Church History Committee reports.

8. Melvin A. Jones, *The Bohse Family History* (Lincoln, Neb.: unpublished article, 1958), p. 11.

these houses leaked badly and sometimes caved in. Therefore dug-outs were more popular. A six- to eight-foot deep excavation covered with a few boards and prairie sod proved more waterproof. Even at this, prairie dog tunnels often made for flooding in these dwellings during the rainy season. The leaky conditions for one settler were so bad that the family had to eat under an umbrella at mealtime. Rattlesnakes did abound but seemingly were not a great cause of death or injury.

The settlements in eastern Oklahoma around Inola were built in 1913-1914 and still remain somewhat isolated from the other churches of the Oklahoma Convention by about 150 miles.

Many settlers found fuel for heating and water a serious problem, especially in the Fairview, Orienta, and Enid areas. Wells dug near Medford and Deer Creek in those early days are still in use today, pulling up good water from underground aquifers. Often wells that were dug to sixty feet or deeper brought in alkali water which could not be used for household purposes. When firewood was scarce, it was not uncommon for settlers to burn buffalo and cow chips as well as grass as a source of heat. Children were sent to turn the chips (cattle droppings) in the field so that they could dry thoroughly before they were gathered and stored in a dry place to be used as fuel.⁹

Finding employment was hard. One early settler in Medford got a job with the railroad for twenty-five cents a day to help support his family of fourteen children. The general diet of these early settlers was made up largely of what they could grow: beans, cakes made from meal of kaffir corn ground in coffee grinders, corn bread and gravy, watermelon and cowpeas. A concoction called *prips*, made from roasted wheat or barley, often served as a substitute for coffee.

The quarter section of land where the southwest part of the town of Corn now stands was homesteaded by a man named Friesen. When conditions were dry and dusty, Friesen traded the whole 160 acres for a horse and saddle and headed back to Kansas. Another man traded eighty acres for a mowing machine. At one point, a Rogalsky family was so destitute for food that they and a neighboring family peeled sugar cane and ate it as their meal. This same family came with twenty dollars, of which sixteen dollars went for a filing fee, and two dollars was loaned to a destitute neighbor. In return, the neighbor shared the milk from one cow with the Rogalskys, from which they made *kleeta moos* which became their sole diet for at least three weeks.¹⁰

9. Marvin Elroy Kroeker, "The Mennonites of Oklahoma to 1907." Unpublished manuscript, University of Oklahoma, Norman, p. 42.

10. Lloyd Chester Penner, "The Mennonites on the Washita River: The Culmination of Four Centuries of Migration," p. 107.

Early Oklahoma Mennonites learned to share what they had and to make do with the little they possessed. Oklahoma churches shared their money to buy a vehicle for Christian Ramseier, Orienta, itinerant preacher, when the Convention was only one year old.¹¹ New Hopedale (Meno) hosted the General Conference in 1914, a mighty effort, requiring new and temporary buildings, which actually involved sacrificial giving from other Convention churches as well.¹² One more example of this attitude of using all resources in order to share was the Eden (Inola) ladies serving a noon meal out of a granary on the Henry Pankratz' farm to the General Conference Ministers' Conference in 1922.¹³

One often hears about the constant conflict between the early settlers and the native Indians, but this was not usually true with Mennonite families. As a whole, relationships were quite harmonious with a few close friendships being formed. When the Indians would trade with the settlers for a cow or calf, the animal would be slaughtered on the spot and eaten immediately by the tribe. One Indian had a wife who had been raised by a Mennonite family in Kansas. She had even learned to speak *Plautdietsch* (Low German).¹⁴

Socially, Mennonites have been thought to be seclusive. This may have been in part because of their opposition to some of the accepted forms of amusement, such as dancing and pool hall games. Then, too, there was their earlier adherence to the German language. Mennonite youth were raised with strict rules compared to the surrounding community. They were not allowed to go to parties unless carefully church oriented. One church feud in Bethel, Hydro, was over a member having evening songfests with the youth in his home even though hymns were being sung.¹⁵ One time a minister in Greenfield was criticized for organizing a ball team for the youth of the church.¹⁶ Too much socialization was suspect by the church leaders.

The low incidence of crime, immorality, and divorce among Mennonites has been credited in part to their sheltered lifestyle. But today's Mennonites realize that many undesirable traits have somehow entered into their circles, too.

Foods with a history

Holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost often meant church celebrations as well as large family reunions. These holidays

11. See chapter 8 on Oklahoma Convention history.

12. New Hopedale Mennonite Church (Meno) History Committee.

13. Mrs. John (Martha Enns) Hiebert, "The Women's Mission Society," *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Eden Mennonite Church*, p. 11.

14. Penner, p. 102.

15. Bethel Mennonite Church (Hydro) History Committee.

16. Greenfield Mennonite Church (Carnegie) History Committee.

were often observed for more than one day. With their families of ten to twelve children, these gatherings could soon become quite large. As is still the custom today, along with such gatherings came foods that are all-time favorites. Such foods as *zwieback*, *plumamoos*, *leverwurst*, *bierocks*, *borscht*, and *verenike* are still favorites and fare well at Mennonite Central Committee relief sales in Oklahoma.

Zwieback, two rolls, one on top of the other, is said to have been a staple food for the Mennonites on their long journey by boat from Russia to North America. These *zwieback* were roasted much like melba toast until they were dried and hard and could be stored for long periods without spoiling. They were eaten with jellies, honey, and other spreads. They were even eaten like cereal with milk and sugar and called *brucca* in Low German.¹⁷

Rites of courtship and marriage

Many stories abound about how different couples in those early days of settlement met each other and were later married. Since the church was a center for social life, it was at its functions that the young people became acquainted. Courtship was carried on under the careful scrutiny of their elders. After a boy had dated a girl two or three times, it was a foregone conclusion that they would be married.

Following their announcement, the betrothed pair would make the rounds visiting the relatives of both families. It seemed important that the wedding be announced in church two weeks before the occasion which often occurred in the fall of the year after harvest.

The night before the wedding, the *polterabend* or charivari was a big occasion, resulting in bringing gifts much like our gift showers of today. Later, the charivari occurred after the wedding day and was associated with lots of noise and gaiety. At one charivari, in the Herold church community near Cordell, a young man was killed accidentally by a gunshot. Guns and firecrackers were often used to make noise, and at times the bride was captured and hidden from her husband until certain conditions were met. Often the couple were escorted in separate vehicles to a nearby town and the groom was forced to push his bride down the main street in a wheelbarrow. The crowd then returned to the young couple's home and were served refreshments. The entire evening's activity was all in fun, but it was sometimes overdone.¹⁸

Weddings were often long, with at least two sermons, one in German and one in English, with each being at least thirty minutes. The marriage couple was seated in the front of the church for the cere-

17. Eden History Committee.

18. Herold History Committee.

mony. The bride was not given away by her father, but often she and her groom walked down the aisle together. They had no attendants.

The reception following the ceremony became the most exciting part of the wedding for those asked to help serve tables. This was done by couples and it often gave single girls a chance to be with their favorite young men. The giving of rings came into practice sometime in the 1930s. Most weddings took place in the afternoon and were major social gatherings within the community. A big feast was held, which called for the butchering of either a beef or a hog, or perhaps both, by the bride's family.¹⁹

The big feasts were later changed to the serving of *zwieback*, cheese, and bologna, coffee, or tea. The family of the bride baked lots of cakes during the week previous to the wedding, to be served at the reception. One novelty was serving cube sugar, for no apparent reason except to eat like candy or even to save as a souvenir.²⁰

Hirschler writes in his 1937 thesis that, "Weddings in the 'Cherokee Strip,' as the Cherokee outlet of Oklahoma was often erroneously called during the 1890s, usually were gayla [sic] affairs, even if there were no homes large enough to accommodate all the guests, and no churches in which to perform the ceremonies." During this time the brides wore black dresses and white veils.²¹

As the years passed, larger churches were built and weddings were then held in the church, usually around three o'clock in the afternoon. The use of attendants did not become popular until later. The receptions remained as a celebration in the home of the bride or other family member, whose home was large enough to host the expected crowd. In later years, church fellowship halls became available. Eden church (Inola) had a custom to place small trinkets in the wedding cake before it was decorated. Then as the cake was served, excitement was created to see which trinket one might receive in their piece of cake. Each had a special meaning.²²

The honeymoon trip has not always been traditional. Before modern means of transportation, the newlyweds would spend their first night in their own home, if they were fortunate enough to have one, or they would stay at the home of the bride's or groom's parents.

Funerals in the home

In those early days, funerals were handled by the family and not as a purchased service. The early history of the New Hopedale church

19. Bethel History Committee.

20. Eden History Committee.

21. Hirschler, p. 46.

22. Eden History Committee.

says that their first funeral was held in a district schoolhouse and was for a child, Anna Johnson, about one year old. It was the first funeral preached by J. J. Ratzlaff. The mother and an aunt had walked one mile to a country store to purchase some white cloth and lace to make a pillow for the casket and to line it. The homemade casket was built by the child's father and a friend. The funeral took place in May and wild flowers were used to make a wreath.²³

During these days, embalming was not practiced, nor was it mandatory. Therefore funerals were held the day following death, if not the same day, depending on the weather. The body was washed and then packed in ice until the morning of the funeral when it was dressed and placed in the homemade casket.²⁴ Marie Becker from the Turpin church remembers her grandfather's death when she was only five years old. After people from the community had come to wash and dress the body, it was laid on a board and tied to the ceiling until the casket was finished.²⁵

Often the body would lie in state in a granary or the parlor room or sometimes even upstairs in the home. Some families would keep a burning candle near the casket and the family would sit in the room to meet family and friends who gathered to offer their condolences. Neighbors would come in to do chores and whatever needed to be done for the bereaved family. When a mother of a young family passed away, the children were often farmed out to other families and even adopted by them. This accounts for many confusions which occur in researching family trees.²⁶

Times of true communion

It is not possible to separate beliefs from that which was purely social among early Mennonites in Oklahoma. The many occasions of togetherness made it possible to live through the times of drought and deprivation. In the holiday celebrations, the daily *faspas*, and the shared grief at funerals, there was and continues to be among Oklahoma Mennonites a very real bond which represents true communion.

23. New Hopedale History Committee.

24. Eden History Committee.

25. Newsletter, "75 Years of Sowing and Reaping," Turpin Mennonite Church, 1907-1982, p. 18.

26. Turpin History Committee.

7. Being a peace church makes a difference

Robert R. Coon

Mennonite settlers came to Oklahoma to find land upon which to live and prosper. They came largely from other places in the United States. Before that, they or many of their forebears had come from Europe. Many of them had fled Europe because the military mindedness of the nations threatened their nonresistant beliefs. From the days of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, their pacifism had troubled the people among whom they lived. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they approached the governments of Germany and Prussia, hoping to obtain exemption from military service.

Yet, a weakness existed. They left Europe without working through how this belief of nonresistance was to be applied to the society in which they lived.

In the United States, they had found the peace and the land they had been hoping for. The doctrine of nonresistance faded into the background of their daily toil and became unimportant.

Mennonites in the Revolutionary War were forced to join the Revolutionary armies. To refuse could have exposed them to mob violence. The Pennsylvania Assembly gave assurance of respect for their views but made them pay a fine. The Mennonites reasoned that the government was responsible for the use or misuse of these fines.¹

During the Civil War, a conscription law was passed for the first time. Various states could decide upon exemptions. In 1863, Congress passed a bill drafting all able-bodied men between the ages of

1. Lloyd C. Penner, "The Mennonites on the Washita River: The Culmination of Four Centuries of Migration." Ed.D. dissertation, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, 1976, p. 256.

eighteen and forty-five. Exemption could be purchased for \$300 or by hiring a substitute. Mennonites felt it was wrong to hire a substitute, but they did pay the fee. Those living in Virginia had no options. They either joined the Confederate Army or fled.²

The Mennonites in Oklahoma in 1898 were faced with the declaration of the Spanish-American War. An emergency meeting of the Western District Conference was held May 7 or 17, 1898, in Newton, Kansas. Most of the General Conference churches sent delegates. They came up with four basic statements: 1) seek exemption from military service and affirm traditional belief in nonresistance; 2) seek the welfare of our country in all ways permitted to us; 3) a partial endorsement of voluntary service; 4) a call for international arbitration for all differences between the nations.³ The General Conference Mennonite Church could not stand by and say nothing.

Caught unprepared by World War I

When war began in Europe in 1914, German-speaking Mennonites in Oklahoma remained neutral in their thinking. They had no sympathy with Germany's war policies, even though some of their own relatives might be in danger of American weapons should this country enter the war. There was some anxiety. The 1915 Oklahoma Convention tried to deal with this anxiety in discussion and resolution.⁴

The Western District did not respond officially to the war threat until a specially called meeting of the District several days after war had been declared on Germany in 1917. This meeting came as a reaction to the possibility of universal military service.

The meeting dealt with how Mennonites could best express loyalty to their country without violating their nonresistant stand. They also talked about the possibility of sending a select delegation to Washington to present their views and concerns.

A committee was appointed called the Freedom from Military Service Committee or Exemption Committee. Their duties were four-fold. They were to clarify the present draft regulations for young Mennonites, work at strengthening the nonresistant faith of these men, visit and advise the men who found themselves in military camps, and coordinate the committee's efforts with the efforts of other Mennonite denominations.⁵

2. Penner, p. 257.

3. Report of the special meeting of the Western District Conference held on May 7, 1898 in the Newton church, Western District minutes, pp. 27-28.

4. Oklahoma Convention minutes 1915, p. 144.

5. Report of the special meeting of the Western District Conference held in the First Mennonite Church at Newton, Kansas on April 11, 1917, pp. 1-3.

The committee encouraged local churches to express their faith in petitions to the government. The committee made many trips to Washington to talk with legislators regarding exemptions to military service. Many petitions were sent. A meeting with the secretary of war, Newton D. Baker, was held.

Senators and representatives from Kansas and Oklahoma helped in gaining access to war department officers. Lists of various types of alternative service were offered. Vague promises were given that action would be taken later. In October 1917, the committee visited Camp Travis near San Antonio, Texas, because of reports that the Mennonite men there were being mistreated. They found twenty-eight men who were not segregated as had been promised. They spoke with the commanding officer to assure proper treatment.

The committee's report to the Western District Conference sessions in 1917 showed that the church was going through the same process that it had in Europe, trying to free itself from military service. They found it hard to understand the regulations about registration and procedures relating to military service.⁶

Mennonite men who had registered knew little about the scriptural foundations of the nonresistance doctrine. Two collections of Scripture passages upon which the Mennonite confession of nonresistance was founded were published, one in German and the other in English. These were well received.

Nonfighting men sent to military camps

The 1917 Oklahoma Convention devoted part of its business to a free discussion of the military service issue.⁷ In addition, the 1918 Oklahoma Convention heard a report concerning the spiritual nurture of the Oklahoma nonfighting men at Camp Travis. The report was that they were having difficulty in their visits since the men were scattered throughout the camp and the visitors were only allowed two hours time in the detention camp with them.

The Convention sent H. R. Voth, Goltry, Oklahoma, to the Exemption Committee asking one of the committee members to go with J. B. Epp to Camp Travis. (Voth's son was being harassed.) Visiting privileges were not easy to get, and other conditions were far from satisfactory.⁸ P. H. Richert of the Exemption Committee went with Epp.

The Western District Exemption Committee in its report to the

6. Report of the Special Committee for Freedom from Military Service of the Western District Conference to the 26th Conference, 1917, p. 37.

7. Oklahoma Convention minutes, 1917, p. 155.

8. Oklahoma Convention minutes, 1918, p. 160.

1918 Western District also mentions the ministry of the brethren of the Convention in supplying the Word to the men at Camp Travis.

Other reports said that the ministry of the Word was limited to those ministers who spoke English. Eventually, the visits ceased entirely because of the time and the cost of traveling, the limit of two hours for the service, and also that no personal visiting with the men was allowed.⁹

Provisions were made at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, through the committee, to have separate services for the Mennonite men. The first Sunday, ministers from Kansas, Oklahoma, Dakota, and Illinois were present. There were about 2,000 prisoners at the general worship. At a special Mennonite service there were about 125.¹⁰

During the summer of 1918, H. R. Voth and P. H. Richert made a trip to Fort Leavenworth to check on the situation there.¹¹

German-speaking communities under attack

Prior to all this, President Woodrow Wilson in his 1916 campaign had made veiled references to the danger of hyphenated Americans¹² and their potential disloyalty. Much anti-German hostility was aroused. When he was reelected and it was certain that the United States would enter the war, the hostility increased helped by outspoken American officials and patriotic national and local newspapers.

In Oklahoma, civilian councils of defense had been set up following the declaration of war. Nationwide they were intended to be a patriotic medium to sponsor food conservation, fund raising, and armed forces recruitment.¹³ Many of these became extra-legal in order to enforce what they termed patriotic attitudes.

These councils were open in their methods of intimidation, such as using courts, fines, ridicule, shootings, other violence, coercion, and spying upon the German-speaking residents for acts of disloyalty.¹⁴

In May 1918, the Oklahoma State Council directed twenty-five county councils to forbid speaking German in any public meeting, including religious services.¹⁵ In Grant County, the council in-

9. Report of the Committee for Freedom from Military Service of the Western District Conference to the Special Conference, held at Bethel College on June 6, 1918, p. 13.

10. Western District minutes, 1918, pp. 59-60.

11. Western District minutes, 1918, p. 64.

12. Richard C. Rohrs, *The Germans in Oklahoma* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), p. 43.

13. Rohrs, pp. 43-44.

14. Rohrs, p. 44.

15. Rohrs, p. 45.



Civilian councils of defense often took extra-legal actions to enforce patriotic attitudes: "hauling slacker wheat for Uncle Sam near Cherokee."

structed the telephone company officials to prohibit using German in telephone conversations.¹⁶

In the Hydro area, relations between neighbors became strained when the war started. Speaking German over telephone party lines aroused tensions especially when some of the persons speaking were known to regard the German language as superior.¹⁷

The mark of nationalism in many of these cases seemed to be the use of the English language.

In 1917, the *Fairview Leader* warned the Germans in Oklahoma to be careful in their criticism of American policy. Active legal and extra-legal actions began.¹⁸ It seemed again that Oklahomans were fervent in proving their patriotism to the rest of the country.

In Major County, notices were posted on churches requiring services to be conducted in English. The decree stated: "GOD ALMIGHTY UNDERSTANDS THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE. Address HIM only in that Tongue. DO NOT REMOVE THIS CARD."¹⁹

An Oklahoma state teachers' meeting in 1917 passed a resolution that all primary and grammar grades be henceforth taught only in

16. Rohrs, p. 46.

17. Bethel Mennonite Church, Hydro, Historical Committee interview notes.

18. Rohrs, p. 43.

19. Rohrs, p. 19.

English. *Harlow's Weekly* suggested several courses of action to be taken by local officials to limit German.²⁰ Michael Klaassen's German school near Cordell was forced to close.²¹

German-speaking persons or ones with German-sounding names were treated like outcasts. Their businesses were boycotted and many banks refused to accept their deposits. Some of the residents of Cordell, because many German-speaking people traded there, took their trade elsewhere, hurting the town businesses.

Some were even threatened with tarring and feathering. While this did happen to a Mennonite suspected of hoarding flour²² it happened more often to other German-speaking persons.

Even the names of towns came under attack and Bismark became Wright, Kiel was changed to Loyal, and Korn became Corn. The German heritage was to be erased from Oklahoma's place names.²³

Peace convictions shaped by military camp

The reactions to all this intimidation were mixed. The richness of the German language which Mennonites had prized so highly had become a liability. Some changed to the English language or attended English-speaking churches. This upheaval left many scars. Forced assimilation did not sit well. Many lost pride in their heritage. Some Mennonites became confused and were scandalized. Their sons were, in some cases, in the American armed forces fighting over in Germany against the Germans. Others were buying war bonds.

The Selective Service Act of May 18, 1917, promised exemption, but it did not clarify the areas of noncombatant service. The Exemption Committee recommended registration and reporting to military camps. This, according to David A. Haury in *Prairie People* was a critical error for then it removed the men from the protection of the local communities and placed them under military law.²⁴

The government felt that a short time in the military camps would convince any conscientious objector to put on the uniform. This seldom happened. In the army, they found practically no options other than the medical, quartermaster, or engineer corps. Of those drafted in Kansas and Oklahoma, about three-quarters of the General Conference and Mennonite Brethren took the conscientious objector

20. Rohrs, p. 46.

21. Mary S. Sprunger, ed. *Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War One Conscientious Objectors* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1986), p. 97; Helena Klaassen Dalke interview.

22. Bruce Leisy, "The Mennonite Experience in Oklahoma." Unpublished paper, p. 7.

23. Rohrs, p. 47.

24. David A. Haury, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981), p. 201.

stand. The ones arriving in the United States in the 1870s and after seemed to be more firm in their convictions than those who came earlier.

Mennonites registering found the draft boards unsympathetic to conscientious objectors. Those who took this stance were more apt to pass the physical regardless of their condition or status. John Klaassen of the Herold church had poor eyesight and was the only son of a farmer.²⁵ He was the first to go to camp, even though farmers had exempt status when needed at home.

World War I took many Mennonite men off to the military camps, unsure of what to do about the situation. Those at home did not know how their young men would decide concerning the cherished peace position.

Of the young men drafted from Oklahoma, several things seemed to be lacking in their preparation for the war. Few felt that they had received much in the way of peace education from the church or at home.

Mennonite families were largely unsympathetic with the military position of the German nation. Their sympathy was rather with the heritage of the German language. Many were originally of Dutch, Polish, or Swiss descent. They felt earlier that the war would never get serious enough to cause the United States to get involved. And they were not in favor of war, period.

When the draftees asked the Convention churches what to do, they were told to register.

Among many in the Convention churches, Henry J. Becker left with four others from his church at Meno. Albert C. Voth went alone from his church at Goltry. John Klaassen departed from Cordell with two others from the Herold church. They took documents verifying that they were Mennonites and that they were to do only noncombatant work. But the officer in charge at Camp Travis paid no attention to the certificates²⁶ and they were treated like any other recruit.

They were told to wear the uniform and take regular drill. They were harassed to sign the military oath. Some wore the fatigues and did various duties they felt safe in doing at Travis. Some did not. They had to do some decision making on their own as to how, when, and if their nonresistant belief was to be applied.

One minister came to visit at Travis not at all happy about some of the men's stand not to do any work which would lend itself to the war effort. He and the church back home thought that the men should

25. Sprunger, p. 86, Michael Klaassen story, interview with Esther Bergen.

26. Sprunger, p. 33, Henry J. Becker interview.

make some concessions. It seems that this was the experience of many at the camp. Many of the persons in their home churches held opinions concerning the peace position that differed from the draftees' beliefs hammered out in the places where they were.²⁷ Their newfound convictions were more in keeping with the traditional scriptural teachings of the historical Mennonite church.

Due to the visits of the Exemption Committee and some of the pastors to Travis, the men were often segregated from the rest of the camp. They were often given menial tasks as disciplinary measures.

Albert C. Voth was of the opinion that no one really knew what to do with the conscientious objectors. Persons in Washington and others on down were baffled when these Mennonites refused to do any work within the camps or accept any kind of attachment to the military.²⁸

A general court-martial was administered at Camp Travis to forty-five conscientious objectors. The grounds were that they were disobedient in not taking the uniform and thereby disobedient to orders. The men remember this as being a cut-and-dried procedure, a ploy to get rid of the nonresistant element.²⁹ They, along with many other prisoners, were handcuffed and taken by train to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to serve their twenty-five-year sentences.

The men did not receive much better treatment at Fort Leavenworth. They generally reported that the food was not good, but there was always plenty. Visiting was allowed but under guard. Some of the work assigned as hard labor was farm work, easy for the farm boys among the nonresistants.

Scars in the campaign for peace

Some mistreatment was reported. Some of the commanders would allow their officers and noncommissioned soldiers to handle the conscientious objectors roughly. One Oklahoma man suffered kidney injury from such treatment.

John Klaassen from the Herold church contracted influenza while at Fort Leavenworth and died. His body was dressed in the military uniform and shipped back to Cordell for burial. His father, Michael Klaassen, pastor of the Herold church, removed the American flag draped over the casket and put civilian clothes on the body before he performed the burial service. In telling of this, Klaassen says, "I said, in your life you didn't wear the uniform, so in death you shall not wear it either, although this will have nothing to do with his

27. Sprunger, p. 46.

28. Sprunger, p. 60, Albert C. Voth interview.

29. Sprunger, p. 62.

salvation. I couldn't act otherwise."³⁰ Klaassen left that same day for Canada, fearing for his life because of a large furor in the Cordell area.

When Albert C. Voth returned home after his release, some of the respected leaders in the denomination could not understand why he and others had taken an absolute stand against anything military. His reply was, "It's in the system . . . I could not escape this feeling that you are either in or out."³¹

When Voth went to college, some berated him for his stand. Their contention was that those in the government knew better than anyone else what ought to be done. Voth thought that the government had a right to make decisions but that he also had that right.³²

Henry J. Becker, when he came home, was opposed by some Mennonites who felt he was not fit to serve on the school board. There were some at home who did not believe his imprisonment came as a result of his stand of nonresistance but rather on his refusal to be obedient to military orders.³³

The Oklahoma churches came out of the First World War divided as to the peace position. Some rejected it. Others realized that they had taken it far too lightly. They had considered it a tradition rather than a doctrine deeply rooted in God's Word.

Mennonites politically had been used and duped by the sophisticated officials in Washington. The church had compromised too much on the nonresistant stance. They hadn't known how to stand up for what they believed and still be loyal American citizens.³⁴

Preparing to be more faithful next time

In 1924, Gerhard Friesen asked the Oklahoma Convention to consider a plan for voluntary service as an effort to express a positive side of nonresistance. Haury asks, "Was voluntary service primarily a substitute for the military service Mennonites could not give during the war?"³⁵

After World War I, the number of German immigrants decreased considerably. Along with this, the German institutions including schools also decreased.³⁶ A number of German language newspapers in Oklahoma ceased under the crushing patriotic activities of the war. Many Germans gave up the language and with it strong ties to

30. Sprunger, p. 89, Michael Klaassen story, interview with Esther Bergen.

31. Sprunger, p. 58, Albert C. Voth interview.

32. Sprunger, p. 67.

33. Sprunger, pp. 31, 46, Henry J. Becker interview.

34. Haury, p. 203.

35. Sprunger, p. 212.

36. Rohrs, p. 49.

their German heritage.

So when the threat of another war with Germany was talked about in Oklahoma, there were far fewer targets for those inclined to anti-German hysteria. German people had little to say in opposition to the United States entering the war against Hitler and Nazism.

This time Mennonites didn't wait until the last moment to approach the government. Churches began to enter into a serious program of instruction for their youth.

Already in the 1930s, many of the General Conference districts formed peace committees for the purpose of teaching peace and applying principles of peace to life. The Western District peace committee became permanent and was called the Auxiliary Peace Committee. Some groups and individuals, however, did not accept this movement and opposed the peace education programs.

The trials of World War II

Mennonites organized and sent delegates to Washington to talk with those in power about the nonresistant position. These delegates offered alternative service and underlined their loyalty to the United States and made requests for separate camps for conscientious objectors so that the men would not be under military jurisdiction. However, the Burke-Wadsworth Bill of June 1940 offered no exemption except from direct combatant service.

Finally the conscientious objectors were classified as 1-AO if they accepted noncombatant work and IV-E if they chose civilian public service instead.

Some draft boards refused all objections to military service or requests to apply for conscientious objector status. An appeal system was established.

The Western District endorsed the Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps for conscientious objectors. Many of the men who entered CPS were from the Western District. The 1942 Oklahoma Convention also passed a resolution supporting CPS and war relief.³⁷

In one Oklahoma church, all young men eligible for the draft went either as conscientious objectors into CPS during the World War II or into 1-W service later on. Community reaction was that this church had a yellow streak.³⁸

Visitation to these CPS camps was arranged. Women's organizations supplied kits. The Auxiliary Peace Committee coordinated the Mennonite Central Committee canning projects which provided food.

37. Oklahoma Convention minutes, 1942, pp. 40-41.

38. Greenfield Mennonite Church, Carnegie, Historical Committee interview notes.

Offerings and contributions came in from various churches. One Oklahoma church sent in fifty cents per member to the CPS treasurer. Over \$170,000 was given in the period 1943-1945 by General Conference churches.³⁹

General Conference churches in the Washita area had 42 percent of their drafted men in CPS, 17 percent in 1-AO and 39 percent in the regular military.

A Mennonite lawyer in Oklahoma worked with a number of Mennonite men to get them classified as conscientious objectors. He suffered loss financially from those not in sympathy with his work. A "good friend" tossed a brick through his office window. A mob stormed his office, angry because he was getting too many men out of military service making their own draft numbers come up too quickly.⁴⁰

Mennonites in the First World War were thought of as foreigners even though they had been around for decades. In the next war they were seen as nonpatriotic or deviant Americans. Among the Mennonites, a large number no longer held to the doctrine of nonresistance, the very belief that had forced their coming to America.

By 1947, the CPS camps had phased out. By mid-1950, the United States was involved in the Korean conflict. Mennonites had little time to even draw a breath before they were back trying to apply the peace ethic in relationship to military service. The question arose again, "Why must we always wait for our government and some international crisis to nudge us into an expression of our love ethic?"⁴¹

The Universal Military Training and Service Act of 1951 offered provisions for the conscientious objector. The new classification was 1-W. This service was worldwide, placing men in areas of need, often in difficult situations. Many served more than the specified terms allotted them.

PAX units were organized starting early in the 1950s. They had a qualification list to which they had to adhere. Among the standards was "commitment to a ministry of Christian nonresistance and reconciliation."⁴² In the 1960s, President Kennedy set up the Peace Corps designed directly from the PAX program.

Boot camp as peace education

The Vietnam War started before the impact of the Korean War had faded away. All along, the Western District Peace Committee had

39. Haury, pp. 209, 211.

40. Leisy, pp. 9-10.

41. Penner, p. 269.

42. Penner, p. 270.

been working to encourage peace education and staging peace rallies. One was held at Clinton, another at Meno. In 1962, a college-age peace rally was held at Hydro.⁴³ These were well attended as long as there was concern about the war. Interest died down and the rallies were discontinued. H. B. Schmidt, later a pastor at the Deer Creek Mennonite Church from 1971 to 1975, helped at these rallies. Throughout his pastoral career, at this and other churches, he also assisted many young men in draft counseling. Many of these men were from Oklahoma.

A new thrust was found in the predraft boot camps started as a response to Universal Military Training. These were held yearly from 1968 through 1974. The first camp was held at Roman Nose State Park near Watonga.⁴⁴ The 1969 camp was also held there. These were held for potential draftees who explored various decisions that would have to be made. Types of voluntary service were also presented at these camps. A third camp was later held at the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City.⁴⁵ When the threat of the draft ended, the attendance dropped.

In the mid-1970s, the Western District Peace Committee joined with the General Conference Commission on Education in a Cheyenne Peace Efforts Study.⁴⁶

Some of the Oklahoma Convention churches do not actively work at peace education or give much emphasis to the application of the biblical peace and nonresistance doctrine. The service aspect is much more in evidence in the Mennonite Central Committee meat canning, relief sale, and Mennonite Disaster Service programs. We are again in the time when no war threatens us. What will our reaction be if another war engulfs us? What will our peace history be? What will be our response to the claims of the Prince of Peace?

43. Haury, p. 216.

44. "Pre-draft Boot Camp," *The Mennonite*, Western District News, (April 2, 1968), p. A-1.

45. "Seventy at boot camp," *The Mennonite*, Western District News, (May 5, 1970), p. A-1.

46. Haury, pp. 215-16.

8. Working together in the Oklahoma Convention

Wilma McKee

“On the 12th day of September, 1899, at 9 a.m. at Shelly, Oklahoma, the Conference was opened by Brother Christian Ramseier with a song and prayer.”¹

Why did these ninety persons, seventeen of them residents of Kansas, meet together at this historical moment and agree to make the Local Conference of the Mennonites in Oklahoma a permanent organization which would meet annually?

Their goal was to find a way for Oklahoma congregations to develop closer ties with one another. The meeting was chaired by Christian Krehbiel, Halstead, Kansas. M. M. Horsch, Arapahoe, was the secretary. Both were elected by those attending.

The first order of business was to find ways to accomplish their goal. Five points were discussed and agreed to:

1. The local conference should be only for upbuilding and have no business or occupational functions.
2. Through pulpit exchanges, the monotony in each congregation would be broken and both preachers and members would enjoy more blessings.
3. The members as well as the preachers should visit one another.
4. Prolonged meetings should be held, especially suitable for each situation, and intended to bring about conversion and awakening of indifferent souls.
5. Itinerant preaching should care for the isolated brothers and sisters. The itinerant preacher should be able and willing to serve in the English language where necessary.

1. Local Conference of Mennonites in Oklahoma minutes, September 12, 1899.



Ninety persons formed the Oklahoma Convention in 1899 to develop closer ties with one another: *Mission House, Shelly, Oklahoma, site of the first convention.*

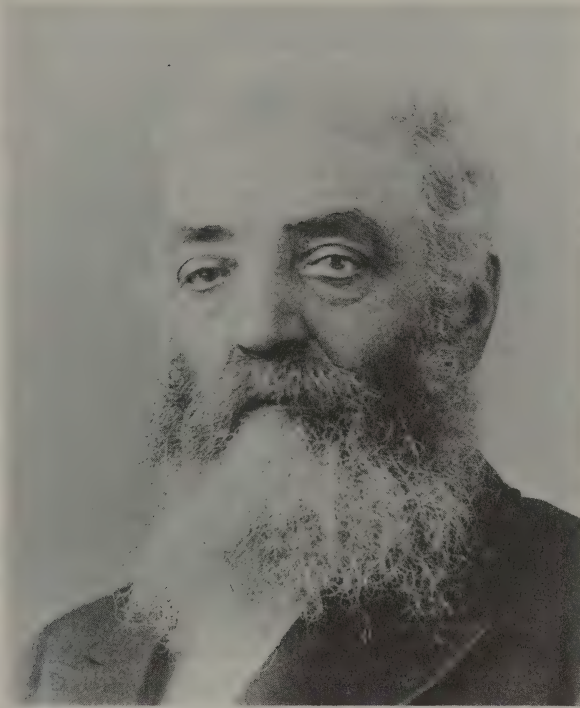
J. W. Penner spoke on "Home Missions in Oklahoma." It was really a discussion of the itinerant preaching work. He suggested that:

1. The preacher chosen should have certain strengths and talents (two languages were emphasized) and be willing to be constantly at work.
2. Preachers from Kansas should often travel throughout Oklahoma and render itinerant preaching service.

The method of presentation was the same on each topic. A speaker outlined the main points and then a "lively" discussion on the topic, point by point, would follow by all present.

The third topic was presented by H. D. Penner, "What can be done to raise (improve) the school system?"

1. Parents received the first instructions as to what they owed their children besides food and clothing.
2. Schools should be built and school districts organized.
3. Teachers should, if possible, come from the congregation.
4. If possible the churches should have their own Preparatory School, a teachers' society should be established and a German Teachers' Institute should be sought.
5. English schooling should in no way be neglected. A German-



The first meeting of the Oklahoma Convention was chaired by Christian Krehbiel, who was elected president by those attending.

English education is of incalculable benefit.

6. The teacher's character was stressed as a model for the children.

7. Parents were told to unconditionally send their children to school.

8. Final success is dependent on a relationship with God, and praying people are the best school supporters.

The final topic was on ways to encourage the preacher and the members of the congregation. Love, truth, and prayer were emphasized and preachers were encouraged not to be too "pastorish" but more supportive.

Another method of participation established in the first meeting was for questions to be handed in during the meeting. These would be discussed by the entire group and sometimes resulted in a vote. At other times they were assigned as topics for the following meeting.

From questions raised at the 1899 meeting, a decision was made to make the conference permanent. Some questions dealt with a "finishing school" and how much capital this would involve. This matter was delayed, since the topic had not been properly presented and no

reasonable plan worked out.

Registration, program, and resolution committees were appointed. J. J. Kliewer, Bergthal, was elected as chairman and John Schmidt, secretary. The resolution committee felt that the conference should be held in the fall, and the dates be chosen by the new officers, taking into consideration the light of the moon.

The total number attending, including those registered, were 260 to 270 persons from 12 Oklahoma congregations, 1 from Berne, Indiana, and 17 from Kansas.²

Long-standing concern for Oklahoma's welfare

In order to comprehend the need and importance for a conference structure among the Oklahoma Mennonite churches, it is necessary to know that labor and concern for Oklahoma and its residents was older than the Western District Conference itself. Missionaries representing the General Conference were in Oklahoma as early as 1880. In the twenty years following, over seventy-five Mennonites worked in some capacity on Oklahoma mission fields and many more Mennonites from various states visited.³

The oldest Mennonite church in Oklahoma, Mennoville, El Reno, asked to be admitted to the Western District Conference in 1893. In 1894, Dietrich Gaeddert, Kansas, helped organize the Bergthal church in Washita County and the wish was expressed that they could be a bright light in the paganism of the Indians.⁴

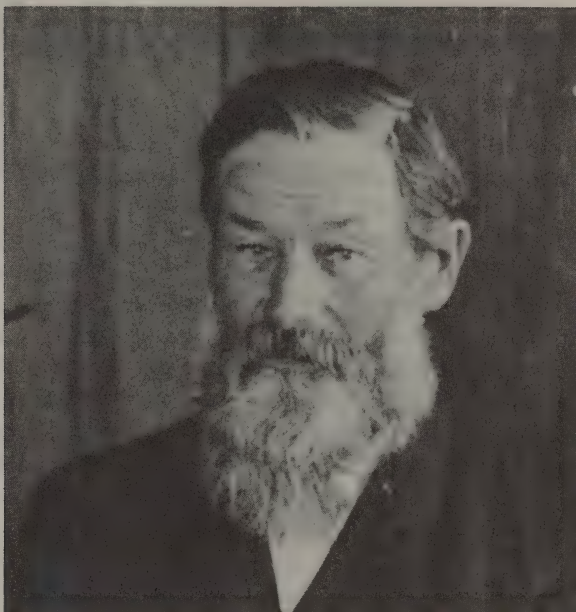
In 1894, the Committee for Poor Relief reported to the Western District Conference the struggle Oklahoma Mennonites were having and sent supplies.⁵ From 1895 to 1899, itinerant ministers traveled many a weary mile in their concern for the scattered brothers and sisters in Oklahoma. In 1895, Jacob W. Regier, at the request of the Western District Conference, visited families and congregations in Medford, Mennoville, Omega, Lahoma, and North Enid. In the same year, John Penner of Beatrice, Nebraska, spent four weeks in Oklahoma. His report to Western District expressed the fears he felt that because many are so scattered, they will be lost to the Mennonite faith. He said, "Probably no one has more attentive listeners than he who preaches the gospel to these, for through privation they have

2. Local Conference of Mennonites in Oklahoma, minutes.

3. Kansas Conference of Mennonites minutes, 1877-1892. See also chapter 2 on early mission work by Lawrence Hart.

4. Western District Conference minutes, 1894 (after this referred to as "Conference").

5. Ibid., 1894, reports of the Committee for Poor Relief.



Christian Ramseier expressed astonishment at how scattered the Mennonite families were.

learned to appreciate what among us, many believe to be able to do without.”⁶

In report after report, the itinerant ministers mention the joy with which they are received and the way preachers and lay members transported them from place to place with horses and wagons. In 1896, J. S. Hirschler, visiting minister for the Home Mission Committee, reported how much remained to be done. He felt a person could easily spend the whole year in Oklahoma and that what he was able to accomplish was like a drop in the bucket. Hirschler gave a further warning, “We should as yet be very cautious about preaching in the English language here in the west, because for the most part the people are not yet sufficiently ripe for it, so that they would take our principles of faith along with them.”⁷

In 1897, three Oklahoma congregations were represented at Western District (Sichar, Bergthal, and Mennoville) and two more asked to join, Salem (Geary) and Saron (Orienta).

In 1897, Christian Ramseier (later minister at Saron) was placed in charge of Oklahoma work and reported about twelve churches. He

6. Conference minutes 1895, report of the Committee of Itinerant Preaching.

7. Ibid., 1896.

expressed astonishment at how scattered the Mennonite families were. A year later (1898) Ramseier reported 138 days of travel and that he had delivered 175 sermons in five circular tours by horseback. His report to the Western District says, "There are conditions which are a great hindrance to the building of the Kingdom of God. Through exchange of thoughts and conversation in the Word of God, much one-sidedness has already been removed."

In 1898, H. D. Penner made a tour of three weeks, preaching nineteen times, and John Kroeker, Bethel, visited fourteen churches. Speaking in loving concern about the many church quarrels, he said that frequently disputes were on outward points not of great importance. Divisions occurred which on examination showed that truth lay in the center. If both parties were not so harsh, they would be bound to be reunited, but the main cause was usually the personality of one or more persons. He felt this showed clear evidence of the poverty of our Christianity and ends with the need for the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.⁸

The first ten years

With this background, it is evident there were serious needs among the Oklahoma Mennonites in 1899. In a time when travel was especially difficult, they were scattered far apart. Due to drought and crop failure they were suffering physically. Spiritually, they were deprived, especially those families far from other groups. An emotional need for togetherness is clearly felt in the minutes of the first Oklahoma Conference. In the reports of the itinerant preachers, one senses a blend of duty, loving concern, and weariness from a work too large for their limited resources. All of these reasons came together and led to the formation of the Local Conference of Mennonites in Oklahoma, later to be known as the Oklahoma Convention.

When the time came for the second local conference on October 2, 1900, the Oklahoma Mennonites had provided a vehicle for the itinerant minister, Christian Ramseier. No longer did he need to make his journeys on horseback. Ramseier had baptized twenty-seven persons on his tours across Oklahoma.

The Perry church with eighteen members was involved in church building and had received \$114.34 of the \$300 needed from seven Kansas churches.⁹

The topics discussed at the New Hopedale church, Meno, with J. J. Kliewer as chairman, were:

8. Ibid., 1897-1898.

9. Ibid., 1900.

1. "The Practical Involvement of the Churches in Mission Work," by M. M. Horsch, Arapaho.

2. "How Can Mutual Visitation Between the Churches Be Accomplished?" by H. Banman, Lehigh, Kansas. Practical difficulties were thoroughly discussed and the feeling expressed that the main hope for preacher visitation was still the itinerant preacher. As a local conference, they expressed joy and heartfelt gratitude to the Western District Conference for their help with the itinerant preacher service in Oklahoma. They asked for it to be continued.

3. "The Order and the Building of the Congregation," by J. S. Krehbiel.

4. "The School and Education in Oklahoma," by Professor H. O. Kruse, Newton.¹⁰

The third annual conference met at Mennoville, El Reno, with J. S. Krehbiel as chairman. The three days were structured with a mission festival, a children's festival, and then the usual topics followed by discussion. Sprinkled liberally between were sermons by various speakers and lots of singing.

One of the topics was "What position does the Oklahoma Conference take toward the Western District Conference?" Christian Ramseier spoke on the development of both conferences. He said Oklahoma now had thirteen organized churches and each one had at least one minister to prepare for Sunday. He felt there was reason to praise God and give thanks. He ended by saying that the Oklahoma Conference was subordinate to the Western District Conference. Oklahoma Conference existed for spiritual and devotional purposes. The discussion which followed brought out that Oklahoma was a member of the Western District Conference and they wanted to remain so.¹¹

After the third conference was over, J. S. Krehbiel, chairman, attended the Western District Conference and brought this declaration from the Oklahoma group:

1. "We submit this name change to the Western District. From now on we shall be known as the 'Annual Convention of the Mennonite Churches in Oklahoma.' "

2. Cordial greetings are sent from the Oklahoma churches to the Western District Conference.

The Western District expressed itself as being satisfied with the declaration from Oklahoma and returned the greetings.

At this same Western District Conference, Ramseier made the suggestion that in time the Oklahoma churches might assume re-

10. Oklahoma Convention minutes, October 2, 1900 (after this referred to as "Convention minutes").

11. Ibid., October 20-22, 1901.

sponsibility for certain stations in Oklahoma without making demands on the mission treasury.¹²

A concern for new churches

The annual convention of Mennonite churches in Oklahoma met in 1902 in the Friedensau church, Perry. One of the themes was "How do we go about starting new churches in the new settlements in our territory?" This led to a resolution asking for Conference ministers to continue to visit, but also that ministers from existing churches visit the new settlements as often as possible. To bring this about, the chairman appointed a committee to set up a schedule for such visits: Christian Ramseier, Orienta; J. S. Krehbiel, Geary; and Michael Klaassen, Herold.

Of the thirteen churches, all had their own minister, but eight more settlements needed organizing and were without a minister. These places were visited by Christian Ramseier, itinerant preacher.

In 1900, the expenses for the Convention were thirty-five cents, in 1901 expenses were ten dollars, and in 1902, \$7.26, leaving a balance in the treasury of \$2.19.¹³

In November 1903, the Convention met at First Mennonite, Geary, with John Lichti as chairman and P. R. Kaufman, secretary. Fourteen congregations were represented and the topics had to do with what were called "Our Special Beliefs." Included were the oath, refusal to bear arms, authority in the church, tithing, and secret societies. One of the questions handed in asked if women should be allowed to vote in Sunday school. The discussion which followed was to the effect that since women may be elected, they may also vote.

A building was underway for a preparatory school in Gotebo under the direction of Henry Riesen with classes to begin October 3, 1904.¹⁴

Oklahoma Territory was still first on the Western District Conference agenda. They were satisfied that the Oklahoma Convention committee had supplied many churches with ministers, but recognized the need still existed for an itinerant preacher.¹⁵

When the convention met in October 1904, in the Bergthal church, Corn, with Jacob Jantzen as chairman, a tent had been borrowed from the Mennonite Brethren. Such a strong wind came up in the afternoon that it was necessary to move everyone into the church building. Not discouraged by weather, the group passed a resolution to lengthen the time for Convention back to three days. A resolution

12. Conference minutes, 1901.

13. Convention minutes, November 9, 1902.

14. Convention minutes, November 2-3, 1903.

15. Conference minutes, 1903.

was also passed to have a ministers' conference planned and promoted by the program committee. There were no expenses at this convention and therefore no offering was taken.¹⁶

By this time twenty-five families were settled in Woodward County, at Lookout. Another seven families lived at Avard. People in Kidder, Caddo County, were holding worship services and were being served once a month by ministers of other Oklahoma churches. For the remaining Sundays, they had Sunday school and read a sermon. Six Mennonite families were living in North Enid.

In November 1905, the convention met in the Deer Creek Church with Christian Hirschler as chairman. During the children's festival, a detailed study of the Sunday school brought discussion on prejudices against the Sunday school. One speaker felt that it was not proper to have a good time in Sunday school but instead to serve the Lord. Regardless of this, methods were discussed which would make Sunday school attractive. One question handed in debated if a bell should be used in Sunday school.

"What can Oklahoma churches do in order to help the deaconess cause?" was the topic introduced by H. R. Voth. A resolution passed which said: "The Oklahoma Convention takes notice with joy that the last Western District Conference has taken the Deaconess matter as a branch of their mission, and expresses the hope that delegates to the Western District will call attention to this fact and urge the brethren of the churches, and especially the ministers, to stress this matter and persuade them to be co-workers with this branch of home missions."

J. S. Krehbiel presented a paper, "Under what conditions can members of other denominations be received into our congregations?" Krehbiel called attention to articles of faith of the General Conference. Seekers should be made thoroughly acquainted with our stand on baptism, taking the oath, and nonresistance.

Another discussion pertained to cooperatives and unions. The decision was reached that the Oklahoma Convention considered cooperatives as branches of secret societies since they demanded an oath for membership, and therefore advised the brothers not to become members.

Missionaries were present, including Rodolphe Petter, and so it was decided to take an offering for their expenses. They received \$71.42, an amazing amount.¹⁷

H. R. Voth had often visited the brothers and sisters at Coy, and a church had been organized. In 1906, itinerant preachers for Okla-

16. Convention minutes, October 24, 1904.

17. Convention minutes, November 13-14, 1905.

homa were Voth and J. R. Toews. They reported thirty to forty Mennonites living at Hooker. Jake Quiring from Russia visited groups at Beatrice, Avard, Sophia, Ironhoe, and Meno. In Beaver County alone, four or five groups of scattered Mennonites were living.

Trouble was again on the horizon. Mennoville, El Reno, Oklahoma's first organized church, had become involved with the World Faith Mission Association and in spite of all the Western District Committee for Church Relations could do, their minister Joel Sprunger and a number of members left the church. J. S. Krehbiel was called on to help the remaining members. The church in Caddo County also divided over the calling of a minister and now became First Mennonite and Bethel Mennonite, Hydro.¹⁸

In 1906, the Oklahoma Convention was hosted by two Gotebo churches, Friedensthal and Ebenezer, with J. S. Krehbiel, chairman, and Henry Riesen, secretary. The attitude of a Christian congregation toward alcoholic beverages was discussed. Other discussion was on ways to make youth feel satisfied. A youth library was suggested with advice to use the Mennonite Book Concern as much as possible, and the Young People's Society was to be encouraged in congregations.

The convention was held in the Dutch Reformed Church and for the first time a resolution was written into the minutes in English, in order to thank the Reformed Church.¹⁹

The 1907 convention at New Hopedale, Meno, was concerned about the settlers committee and H. R. Voth spoke on the topic "What can the Convention of Mennonites of Oklahoma do in unison with the Western District Conference for those congregations in Oklahoma which are still without a minister?" At Mennoville there was preaching every other Sunday; Coy was without a minister, as were several other groups. Voth asked if an arrangement could be made where people living in less settled areas could have a sermon once a month. The answer was to choose a committee which should report to the Western District Conference. They would make a list of churches without ministers in Oklahoma and turn it over to the Western District Traveling Minister's Committee.

Another topic discussed was revival meetings which were not welcome in all congregations. Where there were such meetings, they should ask, warn, invite, but not arouse emotions. Their purpose was to warm up members, to lift those who had fallen, and to win those who were on the outside. They should be led by the local minister,

18. Conference minutes, 1906, reports of Committee for Itinerant Preaching and Committee on Church Affairs.

19. Convention minutes, November 26-27, 1906.

with the help of God-fearing brethren. The advice was to be wise and tactful. The difficult thing was not in winning, but in keeping a congregation. P. R. Voth, chairman, closed the meeting with thanks for the growing attendance and the vital sharing. Special thanks were given to the brethren who had come from Kansas and who had served with unselfish love and God-given strength.²⁰

The 1908 Western District Conference minutes show that the plea for the Oklahoma churches without ministers had been heard. At least nine ministers did itinerant preaching in Oklahoma. Of the 197 votes cast at Western District Conference, 43 were from Oklahoma.²¹

The Oklahoma Convention meeting at Saron, Orienta, in 1908, felt there was still a lack of spiritual nurture and appointed a committee of three to lighten and support the Western District Conference Traveling Minister's Committee: John Ratzlaff, Meno; C. C. Frey, Coy; and Henry Riesen, Gotebo. Another concern was how to get more people to attend Oklahoma Convention. Those who attend should tell others at home how wonderful the fellowship was and how helpful the discussions and messages were.²²

The 1909 convention in First, Geary, followed up by having H. R. Voth, Newton, talk on the necessity and purpose of the Convention. David Goerz, Newton, Kansas, closed this topic by giving the Convention the advice to keep its emphasis on inspiration.

Much concern for youth

Topics and discussions in the 1907-1909 conventions show much concern for youth. High schools, Sunday school, youth societies, and home training were dealt with. A 1909 resolution suggests that from then on, the youth organization be on the program. Indian Christians also received words of welcome. The last message was on the subject "Our forefathers during the time of persecution."²³

In the Western District minutes of 1909, a report was given on a new field at Goltry. It had been left untended except that New Hope-dale, Meno, had helped some. H. R. Voth found it "ripe unto harvest." Christian Hirschler began to go every second Sunday and within a year, a new church was organized and a building started in south Goltry. However, there were many storms within the congregation even during its first year. John R. Duerksen from Bethel College spent one month working among them and such a bond was established that it was hard on both sides when he had to return to Bethel.

20. Ibid., November 17-19, 1907.

21. Conference minutes, 1908.

22. Convention minutes, November 8-10, 1908.

23. Ibid., November 14-16, 1908.

Voth felt they needed a young, steady minister who could offer them something of proper quality, especially for the young people there.

Taloga was reported as a church without a minister. They had asked to join Western District Conference. "Where will we find a minister for them?" the reporter asked. At Greenfield, Carnegie, Henry Riesen went by rail from Gotebo every other Sunday. Then the people went ten to fifteen miles to pick him up, but they had a sacrificial spirit and were willing to do this.²⁴

The first ten years of Oklahoma Convention ended with needs still unmet and a spirit of compassion and zeal which was undaunted. They looked constantly for new ways to help each other.

A serious time (1910-1919)

Many concerns faced Oklahoma Mennonites during the second decade of the life of their Convention. Some of these were common to Mennonites everywhere.

English was entering slowly. While some were giving this at least a "head acceptance," there was much resistance from the heart.

During the 1910 convention at Medford, Missionary J. J. Kliever gave his report on the Indian work in English. There followed a topic on whether it was necessary to have German Primer classes in the Sunday school. The answer was that if there were no German school, then a German Primer class was especially important. There was discussion on how to keep the youth and how they should be involved in the youth organization.²⁵

By the 1912 convention at Saron, Orienta, there were English remarks and a sermon in English by J. B. Epp. Bethel College came in for some questioning. Is there value for our congregations, schools, families, and missions in a school like Bethel? Is the German language being preserved? Why do they have games at Bethel? J. H. Langenwalter replied. He said teachers can attain Bible knowledge at the school. Bethel works for the coming generations. His answers were well received and J. S. Krehbiel, chairman, and Secretary Peter G. Baergen felt many prejudices against Bethel College disappeared and support for the school was promoted.

Henry Riesen spoke for Preparatory Schools as a necessary way to preserve German and referred to the German Sunday school as God's service.²⁶ In an effort to maintain the German schools, the committee for schools and education of the Western District often paid school

24. Conference minutes, 1909, report of Committee for Itinerant Preaching.

25. Convention minutes, November 13-15, 1910.

26. Ibid., October 27-28, 1912.



H. R. Voth spoke about the need to hold on to nonresistance, beliefs about the oath, and church discipline.

fees for poor families. Oklahoma churches in turn made donations to the committee's treasury.²⁷

In both 1912 and 1913 conventions, the purposes for existing as Mennonites and as a Convention were discussed. H. R. Voth spoke of the need to hold on to nonresistance, beliefs about the oath, and church discipline. He felt members must make the confessions of their forefathers more meaningful to their children. Books were recommended, like *History and Faith of the Mennonites* by C. H. van der Smissen.

A change in convention programming began in 1913 when a woman (Sister Schwake) spoke during the children's festival and in 1915 Sister J. Frantz spoke on the family altar. Another change in 1913 was the decision that from then on those attending the convention should pay for their meals: twenty-five cents for two people, or fifteen cents for a single.²⁸

Zoar, Goltry, had joined the Western District Conference in 1911 and also asked for Conference assistance. Abraham Albrecht served there for awhile and pronounced it a difficult field. By 1914, the

27. Conference minutes, 1914, report of Committee for School and Education.

28. Convention minutes, 1912-1915.

Western District had asked H. R. Voth to live at Goltry and also help in other settlements if he had spare time. Thus Voth became the first resident preacher supported by the Western District Conference.²⁹

Voth explained in his report to Western District Conference in 1913 that the people there were from Polish Russia and had lived in a forest region where schools were not available. Many were not able to read their Bibles and had never belonged to any church. There were thirty-nine families totaling ninety persons. Voth explained that work there was of a dual nature, on one hand they were a Conference church, and on the other they were a mission field. By 1916, Zoar had a membership of 68 but many were still outside the church. Zoar paid \$500 to the treasury of itinerant preaching and special note was taken of this effort.

By 1915, Abraham Froese had moved to Carnegie to be minister at Greenfield church. H. J. Dyck and H. R. Voth visited Oklahoma churches as itinerant preachers. At Weatherford, Salem church had members from Springfield, Eakly, Pretty Prairie (Reno County, Kansas), and Bethany (Kingman County, Kansas), and John Flaming was serving as their elder. Eden, Inola, organized and the Settlement Committee of the Western District invited, in the *Bundesbote*, settlers to Inola and Watova.

In 1915, three Oklahoma ministers served on Western District committees: M. Klaassen, Herold, was secretary of the Itinerant Ministry; J. B. Epp, Meno, was on the School and Education Committee; and J. S. Krehbiel was a trustee.³⁰

Oklahoma Bible Academy

In 1911, the New Hopedale church, Meno, started the Meno Preparatory School. It offered a two-year course comprised of seventh and eighth graders, along with German and Bible courses. In 1913, some of the students requested more advanced studies saying they could not yet go to Bethel Academy. The results were that a few ninth-grade subjects, more German, and more Bible were added to the curriculum.³¹

In May 1917, the convention was held at Meno, with J. J. Ratzlaff as chairman. J. G. Baergen, Corn, and Henry Riesen, Gotebo, presented papers on congregational schools. In the discussion which followed, the decision was made to begin an academy and to try to

29. Edmund G. Kaufman, *Mennonite G.C. Pioneers* (North Newton: Bethel College, 1973), pp. 332-33.

30. Conference minutes, 1914-1916, reports of Committee for Itinerant Preaching.

31. Eleanor Schmidt, "The Oklahoma Bible Academy." Research paper presented to Department of Bible and Christian Education, Bethel College, February 1951.

have a teacher and a course prepared by fall. The committee elected was: J. G. Baergen, M. M. Klaassen, J. B. Epp, H. R. Voth, and John Lichti.

The result of this committee's work was the opening of the Oklahoma Bible Academy in the fall, with Gerhard Friesen teaching the high school department and J. B. Epp teaching Bible. The old Meno church was given as the first building. For two years the Meno Preparatory School continued, but then was absorbed into the Academy.³² By 1918, at a special session held at Meno, the difficulty was discussed as to whether the school would be able to continue because of the German language, since strong feelings existed in Oklahoma against German-speaking people.³³ It was resolved:

1. To continue the Academy indefinitely with Meno as the permanent location.

2. That a dormitory shall be built where students can get their lodging and board.

3. That a second full-time teacher be employed if necessary.

4. If the state should require the American language only in all public places, that then we need this school more, and that such a change does not influence our main purpose of this school.³⁴

The purpose of the school was stated as preserving the Mennonite heritage and providing workers for the church.³⁵ Thus the Oklahoma Convention had accomplished what they had wanted since their beginning in 1899, a Bible academy. By 1918, the academy offered sixteen courses in religion ranging from Old Testament to fundamentals of Christianity; from Mennonite history to theory and practice of teaching.³⁶ The first report Oklahoma Bible Academy gave to the 1918 convention was on the Mennonite history course which had been taught by J. B. Epp.

In these early years, Oklahoma Bible Academy served by binding together the Oklahoma Mennonite churches. It fostered cooperation and an interchange of ideas between the churches.

Oklahoma Convention and World War I

Already in 1915, the question was asked of the Convention, "In how far may we take part in the war?" The answer was a resolution: "As

32. Convention minutes, April 20, 1917.

33. Ibid., March 26-27, 1918.

34. Schmidt, research paper as quoted from *Annual of the Oklahoma Bible Academy* (1925), p. 5.

35. Schmidt, research paper, p. 9.

36. William Unrau, "The Mennonites in Oklahoma," for the course in Mennonite History, C. Krahn, instructor, Bethel College, May 24, 1948, as quoted from *School Leaflet*, (July 1918), pp. 2-3.

Mennonites, in accordance with our confession concerning vengeance, we have been charged with the peace program. Therefore, we recommend that we try to be faithful to our confession in accordance with this point.”

The 1917 convention recognized the seriousness of the time and devoted the last session to a discussion on “The demand of our government to draw our young men into service.” The question was asked, “How can we answer our young people about the demands the government is putting on them at this time?” These questions were left unanswered, although the minutes do say that everyone felt better for having brought them out in the open and sharing their fears. Each church was advised to go home and be much in prayer.

At the special convention sessions called in March of 1918, the military issues were discussed, especially the situation of the non-fighting young men in Camp Travis, Texas. As soon as the first call to arms came, a committee had been appointed as responsible to see that a minister visit the conscientious objectors at Camp Travis at least one time a month. The committee consisted of J. B. Epp, H. R. Voth, and J. G. Baergen. The Mennonite Brethren also did this, so the young men were to have two visits a month. The Mennonites were now divided into two sections in the camp: those who refused all work were placed in detention camp, and those who worked in the barracks. A decision was made for H. R. Voth to report to the Special Committee for Freedom from Military Service of the Western District. He found some of the brethren in Camp Travis to be hard pressed and asked that one of the Western District committee travel with J. B. Epp to the camp.³⁷ (This was done and as a result one young man who had been isolated from the group was restored.)

It is difficult to gather from the Oklahoma Convention minutes of May 2, 1917, the exact feelings of those attending. However, Jacob Klaassen, in *Memories and Notations About My Life* clearly reveals the strong emotions of the Herold church leaders, Michael and Jacob Klaassen (brothers) and Jacob Jantzen, their brother-in-law. He writes they were very disappointed at the April 11, 1917, Western District Conference session with prevailing attitudes. Klaassen felt the long years of peace had not been without effort and that the attitude of our fathers on the question of military service was not clearly adopted. He says: “Thus things stood and we had to find our own way in the matter.”³⁸

37. Convention minutes, 1915-1918. See also chapter 7, by Robert Coon, on nonresistance in Oklahoma.

38. Jacob Klaassen, *Memories and Notations about my Life*, translated by Walter Klaassen (mimeographed copy, 1966), p. 6.

Other important changes at the 1917 convention were the establishment of a Song Festival. The motion was made by a woman, Sister J. Frantz, Orienta. In the same meeting Sister Frantz was elected as the first woman to the program committee.

Lodges were discussed and a concern expressed that General Conference free itself from association with those who belonged to a lodge. A vote was taken to send General Conference the information that there were now seventeen churches and four mission stations in Oklahoma who had taken a stand against the lodge.³⁹

In 1918, H. R. Voth reported again to the Western District Conference on the Goltry group. He said much fundamental, educational, and patient work still needed to be done. But he also was able to speak of growth and blessing. When he went to the field there were twenty-three members, now there were eighty-five.⁴⁰

The second decade was one of growth experiences, not all of them pleasant. It was a time of fear as well as hope. Some imperfections had to be accepted and changes came which deepened faith or led to disillusionment.

A Time of Transition (1920-1939)

When Oklahoma Mennonites came together in May of 1920 in the Herold church, Cordell, they were still feeling the effects of World War I. The Herold congregation had been shocked by the sudden loss of two pastors, Michael and Jacob Klaassen, who had fled in fear to Canada. They had also experienced the loss of half of their congregation.⁴¹ Other churches had lost in other ways, and most of all, Oklahoma Mennonites had known fear for their lives and their property, a fear which was always to be a part of them.

So the first thing on the convention agenda was to give thanks for being able to meet "undisturbed and unhindered" and to conduct meetings in their mother language.

J. H. Langenwalter, Bethel College, seemed to be a favorite with the Oklahoma churches of this time. He was speaker in 1920 and 1922 on home missions. The topic, "What do we do so our children will receive religious instruction?" led to a resolution for the churches to have summer Bible schools, with at least part of the instruction in English. This was the beginning of daily vacation Bible schools for many Oklahoma churches. Still on the subject of schools, the convention expressed interest in the academy at Meno

39. Convention minutes, April 20, 1917.

40. Conference minutes, 1918, report of Committee of Itinerant Preaching.

41. For more information, see the history of the Herold church (chapter 3) and "Being a Peace Church Makes a Difference" (chapter 7) by Robert Coon.

which had been closed for the school year, 1919-1920. The decision was made that it should continue as a Convention school. One hundred signatures were asked for and each one who signed agreed to give twenty-five dollars for three years. It was to be called the Bible Academy.

Two messages which show the thinking of the time were "The attitude of a Christian towards the law" and "Signs of the times." The latter message was filled with warnings of which Christians should beware. Included were false teachers of science, modern theology, atheism in the schools, and the teachings of Russia.

The interchurch movement was discussed. While some warned against making quick judgments, others openly wished they had never heard of it. They warned that if Mennonites were to become involved, they would be working with lodge members.

The youth were allowed to present their work at the convention and a woman speaker (Sister Wedel) gave a topic on "Opportunities for youth to build up the Kingdom of God."

Two members of the Western District Traveling Minister's Committee were present: P. P. Wedel and S. P. Preheim. They were welcomed with joy.⁴² Later at Western District Conference, Wedel reported that elders were in short supply in Oklahoma with only five fully ordained ministers in the whole state. After the Western District Home Mission Committee was formed in 1921, Oklahoma churches were able to ask them for help with problems. By 1925, the itinerant ministry was regarded as the main task of the Home Mission Committee, since six Oklahoma churches were without ministers.⁴³

The struggle between the English and German language can be felt in the reports at convention in 1922 at Saron, Orienta. H. R. Voth was chairman and P. A. Penner was the visiting missionary. "How can a person teach a class when only part of the students understand German?" and "Is it right to have German Primer Class?" were questions raised from the floor.

Topics at Medford in 1923 were again about youth, Sunday school, and schools. From 1920 on the music at convention was noticeably made up of gospel songs and at the same time topics were calling for ways to arouse and nourish deeper spiritual life.⁴⁴

Whatever happened to the tent?

An interesting part of Oklahoma Convention history was started in 1923 when a tent committee was established and a tent was bought

42. Convention minutes, May 3-4, 1920.

43. Conference minutes, 1920, report of Committee of Itinerant Preaching.

44. Convention minutes, 1922-23.



The tent became an important part of going to convention: *last noted in 1951, it was used at the dedication of the Saron church in 1930.*

for \$300. Two hundred of it was paid by money which had been given for this, and ninety dollars was borrowed from the Convention. From this time on for many years, the tent was included on each convention program agenda. Shall we rent it to others? How much shall we charge? Can just anyone rent it? Shall it be insured? (It was—the first time at a cost of fifty-one cents.) Shall we keep it? Shall we sell it?⁴⁵

In her diary, May 1938, Mrs. Anna Neufeld tells of a two-day trip to pick up the tent at Inola and take it to Meno in time for the convention.⁴⁶ Convention minutes in 1949 record a motion which passed instructing the Convention officers to dispose of the tent. Evidently this did not happen because in 1950 a motion was passed to give the tent to Go Ye Mission. In 1951, a correction in the minutes clarified that only the use of the tent was given to the mission. This is the final mention of the tent in Convention minutes. Why was the tent so important? Perhaps because remembrance and sentiment play such an important part in faith. For many persons, the tent became an important part of going to Convention meetings. Lumber and tile were borrowed to make seats. Someone had to be responsible to put it up, to store it, to move it, and to report on it each year for convention. Owning a tent was a large responsibility and that responsibility gave it value. Otto Nickel, Cordell, remembers two huge wooden chests,

45. Convention minutes, 1923, 1949, 1950, 1951.

46. Anna Neufeld was wife of H. T. Neufeld, missionary to the Indians at Canton, superintendent of OBA for several years and pastor of the Bethel Mennonite Church, Enid, for twenty years.

approximately six feet long, which were built to store the tent and its equipment. They were carefully made to be mouse-proof and were painted blue. Nickel also remembers that men brought sledge hammers to convention to help put up the tent and that the last place the tent was stored was in a barn on the P. M. Pankratz farm, Cordell.

When the decision was discussed to write the Oklahoma Convention history in September of 1984 at convention, someone asked, "Whatever happened to the tent?" Nancy Koehn, Convention secretary, did some research and discovered that Art Wedel, Cordell, remembers his father, Henry Wedel, buying the tent for covering haystacks in approximately 1959 for about twenty-five dollars. A few of the poles are still in some of the cattle fences around his farm. The tent was no longer needed when the large Sunday meetings began to be held in school auditoriums. Its sale signaled the end of an era.

Already in 1911, after a severe drought had hit at Gotebo, J. J. Kliever directed Friedensthal church members to move to Carlsbad, New Mexico. They became, according to David Haury in *Prairie People*, the only congregation to follow the advice of the colonization committee.⁴⁷ The remaining members joined the Ebenezer church, Gotebo.

When this colonization committee spoke of the independence of Mennonites in choosing a place to live, they most certainly could have been speaking of Oklahoma Mennonites. Many of them were taken in by land and oil companies and lost much for which they had worked hard, as well as being lost in some cases to the Mennonite faith. The John Entz family moved to the Rio Grande valley to buy land and in so doing lost five quarters of valuable land near Hydro. The elder Entzes lived the rest of their lives in McAllen, Texas, but their son John A. Entz and family returned to Hydro and to the Bethel Mennonite Church.⁴⁸ Albert C. Loganbill and sons Daniel and Clyde, Geary, were taken in by this same land company. Albert eventually returned to Geary where he lived until his death. Aldus Loganbill went to Gulfport in a land deal and after a severe loss moved to Inola to live. Peter Paul Krehbiel (cousin of J. S. Krehbiel), Geary, lost heavily in a New York Oil Company venture. These are just a few examples of Mennonites who suffered from "get rich quick" schemes.⁴⁹

The 1920s and 1930s brought many struggles to the Oklahoma Convention. Many of the leaders they had counted on from the first

47. David A. Haury, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981).

48. Interview with John A. Entz, Hydro.

49. Interview with David Habegger, June 1986.

were now lost through death or moving. The convention felt keenly the loss of the leadership of men like J. S. Krehbiel, Geary, who had been chairman six times between 1901 and 1912; J. J. Ratzlaff, Meno, five times from 1914 to 1924; John Lichti, who had been minister 1898-1912 at Zion, Lucien; Deer Creek, 1912-1920; and Medford, 1921-1939. Lichti served at least five terms over a span of years ranging from 1903 to 1937. H. R. Voth served in many capacities in Oklahoma Convention from 1914 to 1927.

Then there was the closing of churches. Of the sixteen Western District congregations to dissolve between 1909 and 1947, eleven were in Oklahoma.⁵⁰ Not only did Oklahoma Convention feel the loss keenly of leadership, but Western District Conference suffered, since these men were usually staunch Conference supporters.

Perhaps because of the war and the loss of the German language, Oklahoma Mennonites became more like the surrounding culture in these years. Slowly, they became as a whole conservative in doctrine. Gradually, some Oklahoma churches became more comfortable with nonconference speakers and materials. This was followed by the support of nonconference missionaries and radio and television ministries. The cycle fed upon itself.

By 1924, J. B. Epp, principal of Oklahoma Bible Academy (OBA), reported forty-eight students. Other teachers at OBA were A. C. Galle, a graduate of Bethel College, and H. U. Schmidt, New Hope-dale church pastor. Convention that year was at Zoar, Goltry, and the fiftieth anniversary of the coming of Russian Mennonites to the United States was noted.

Gerhard Friesen asked the Convention to consider a plan for voluntary service.⁵¹ In 1932, Goltry rented a farm of two quarter sections and gave two thirds of the income from it to the support of ministers, through Conference committees.⁵² By 1927, the Watova church dissolved and B. H. Janzen became the first field secretary for the Western District Conference. Janzen was to have an important part in work among Oklahoma congregations in the years to come.

Western District Conference was held at Herold, Cordell, in 1929, twenty-five years after it met at Herold in 1904.

New ministers were coming into the Oklahoma churches. Henry Funk who had served at Mennoville now began to serve Bethel, Hydro, and continued to be their pastor until 1943. Henry Hege served as minister at Ebenezer, Gotebo, until 1940. He also taught and was principal in the Gotebo high school.⁵³

50. Haury, p. 269.

51. *The Mennonite* (Oct. 23, 1924), p. 42.

52. *The Mennonite* (Sept. 29, 1932), p. 38.

53. *The Mennonite* (Nov. 13, 1930), p. 45.

Oklahoma Bible Academy had an enrollment in 1934 of seventy-eight, a new high, up from twenty-one two years earlier. In 1933, the school had become an accredited four-year high school and the school and church had a joint Thanksgiving service for a new building.

By May 1936, when the convention was held at Sichar church, Cordell, with John Lichti as chairman, the Convention could boast a comprehensive theme, "The Responsibility of the Mission of the Church in Home Missions and Foreign Missions, and in Schools and in the Congregation." Philip A. Wedel was the speaker and Dr. Herbert Dester was the visiting missionary.

The program for the convention was: Sunday morning, Mission Festival; Sunday afternoon, Song Festival; Sunday evening, Young People's program; Monday, business meeting; and Monday evening, Sewing Society program. Tuesday was a day of themes and discussions. The Church Workers Bible Conference Committee had been organized and Theodore H. Epp reported on the Bible Conference. The convention decided to retain this committee and to elect one new member each year. The Church Workers Committee became an important part of Oklahoma Convention, with new and innovative ideas coming from it for many years.⁵⁴

Eden, Inola, hosted the Oklahoma Convention in May of 1937 with John Lichti serving his last term as chairman. The theme was "Preparation for Life." Speakers were W. F. Unruh and John Baergen.

Two resolutions stated that for the first time Oklahoma churches were asked to have a freewill offering for the Convention treasury and the travel expenses of the Convention OBA board member were to be paid by Convention.

Beginning in 1938, the Convention minutes were written in English, except that the secretary August Schmidt forgot and wrote the first sentence in German. Solomon Mouttet was the chairman. The music of the Song Festival was noticeably gospel songs and this evidently caused some concern because in 1936 Henry Hege spoke on "The Place of the Choir in Our Churches in Oklahoma." In 1938, Henry Harder gave a topic on "What Songbooks Should Be Used in Our Sunday School, Christian Endeavor, and Church Services?"⁵⁵

Western District Conference was invited for 1939 to Grace, Enid, and General Conference was invited to Enid in 1941; however, the invitation was not accepted.

The first response to the request for offerings from the churches for Convention brought in \$126.87. All was spent except a balance of \$3.80. In 1939, two Bible Conferences were held; one at Meno and

54. Convention minutes, May 17, 1936.

55. Convention minutes, 1937-1938.



Solomon Mouttet, chosen by lot to be minister of Eden Church, Inola, was president of the Oklahoma Convention, 1936-1941.

one in the southern churches. Sermons were still being given in German and English. However, now the German sermon was carefully placed into the program as a token, just as before the English sermon had been.⁵⁶

Accomplishments and friction (1940-1950)

Solomon Mouttet was chairman of the Oklahoma Convention in May 1940 when it met with P. W. Penner as speaker. The theme was "How to Live the Abundant Life." For the next three years, Henry Hege served as chairman. In 1942, he was Oklahoma representative on the Western District Retreat Committee. Two things are noticeable at this time under Hege's chairmanship: a primary drive to work with youth and a loyalty to the Conference.

Notice was taken at convention that Oklahoma Bible Academy was now celebrating its twenty-fifth year and renewed support and dedication were urged.

During the convention in 1942, two important resolutions were presented by a resolution committee headed by August Schmidt. The first said: "Whereas we are joined in membership to General Confer-

56. Ibid., August 27, 1939.



Two things were noticeable during Henry Hege's chairmanship: a drive to work with youth and a loyalty to the conference.

ence and Western District, we urge cooperation in every undertaking of the conference. We urge our people to remain true to the faith of their fathers by holding to the teaching of nonresistance; that we translate our faith into action by supporting CPS Camps and War Relief."

Prior to the second resolution, Mrs. Helen Hiebert Mueller, secretary to the Western District Retreat Committee, spoke about the young people's work in the Western District and General Conference. The resolution read: "We urge also that in order to help our young people, especially such as are unable to attend our church school, we cooperate with young people's leaders and with the Western District Retreat Committee to sponsor a Young People's Retreat in Oklahoma during the coming summer."⁵⁷

Oklahoma Mennonite Retreat

It was in an effort to give hands and feet to the above resolution that the Western District Retreat Committee and Henry Hege discussed ways they could affect closer relationships between Oklahoma and Kansas people. They decided to plan a separate retreat for Oklahoma youth since due to war they would find it difficult to attend Camp

57. Ibid., November 7, 1942.

Wood in Kansas. The Western District Retreat Committee would help finance the retreat as necessary.

The first retreat directed by Henry Hege was held in the summer of 1943 on the Oklahoma Bible Academy grounds, Meno. The retreat paid for itself with thirty dollars left over. When Hege reported on this retreat to the Convention in the fall, a motion was passed that retreat should be placed in the hands of the Church Workers Committee and that they should work together with the Oklahoma member of the Western District Committee. The Church Workers Committee conducted the second retreat at Meno with Lubin Jantzen as director and Olin Krehbiel and H. E. Miller as speakers. The cost for retreaters was six dollars. The retreat came within \$11.25 of paying for itself.

By summer of 1945, the Church Workers Committee (Henry Hege, Henry N. Harder, and Rudolph Schmidt) felt the need of a place where the retreat could be in an "outdoor setting." After looking at several places around the state, it was decided to use the City Park in Hydro. For the third retreat, Hege was the director, aided by Ben Rahn and August Schmidt. Waldo Kaufman, new minister at Bethel, Hydro, was the recreational director. The boys slept in the "Tin-Roof Hotel," a new one-time pigpen with a partial tin roof. The girls' dorm and dining hall were crude buildings also located in the City Park.⁵⁸

Oklahoma Convention in 1945 passed the motion that the Church Workers Committee be given a free hand to act in working out a plan whereby it might acquire or become part owners of a retreat grounds. In 1946, the Methodist Camp Grounds, Hydro, was rented and retreaters brought their own cots. The director was Waldo Kaufman and speakers were H. Framer Smith, Presbyterian church, and Erland Waltner. One hundred and forty-seven retreaters and leaders attended.

During these early years, the Western District Retreat Committee and the Church Workers Committee worked together by keeping one another informed and by exchanging one or two retreat leaders when possible.

In 1947, a dining hall was built on grounds belonging to the Bethel church, Hydro. To the south of the new building the Convention purchased the remainder of the block which included a barrack-type building which was then faced with native flagstone. Oklahoma churches were asked to give \$200 each for this first effort. In the Convention business meeting in 1947, the Church Workers Commit-

58. Wilma McKee article "Oklahoma Retreat History," for Mennonite Camping Association, 1982.

tee (Kaufman, Hege, and Albert Unruh) were commended and instructed to "forge ahead."

So the retreat program was launched in Oklahoma. Many efforts were made to acquaint the churches with the program. Ministers from Oklahoma were used on the staff, except for the two main speakers. Programs were given in individual churches to interest the youth. However, once the youth had been to retreat they were the program's best promoters. In keeping with the times, conservative dress was the rule and the classes were mostly formal in structure with Bible classes, Mennonite history, and church music given first place.⁵⁹

In an article in *The Mennonite* in 1950, W. F. Unruh reported favorably on his experience at the young people's retreat at Hydro. He stressed the rapport and mutual understanding being built between pastors and young people. He mentioned Bible study being a large part of the program and the appreciation for church music. He also felt that the togetherness experienced in fun and fellowship, in washing dishes and planting grass would enable these youth to work together in church and conference in the future years. The retreat, Unruh felt, lacked just one thing—no guidance was offered to those who sooner or later would be facing the draft.⁶⁰

At the 1943 convention, a request was made to have another half day and devote it to Sunday school. This was done for a number of years. J. J. Esau was speaker on foreign missions and this resulted in two firsts: a large offering for foreign missions of \$193.05, and at the end of the sermon, Esau gave an invitation for commitment to the Lord for service and a number of persons responded.⁶¹

H. P. Fast, Orienta, was chairman for four years (1944-1947) and a number of changes came to the Convention. Go Ye Mission now reported each year and received an offering. Students from the mission often gave testimonies and a speaker talked on child evangelism.

For two years (1949-1950), Albert Unruh was chairman and among the speakers were Philip A. Wedel and Erland Waltner. In 1950, Andrew R. Shelly, field secretary for Mennonite Biblical Seminary, gave Bible lectures at Oklahoma Bible Academy and also visited the Oklahoma churches in the interest of the seminary.

The Home Mission Committee of the Western District was active in Oklahoma in 1950. At the convention in 1949, the question was

59. Convention minutes, reports of Church Workers Committee, 1945-1947.

60. W. F. Unruh, "Oklahoma Retreat Held at Hydro," *The Mennonite*, (Sept. 19, 1950), p. 631.

61. Convention minutes, October 16, 1943.

asked, "What can Oklahoma Convention do to help Oklahoma churches who are without pastors?" Henry Hege made a motion that the Church Workers Committee get in contact with Western District Home Mission Committee and cooperate with them in supplying the churches without pastors.⁶²

Levi Koehn, Home Mission Committee member, helped out with others at Clinton. Thirty-four were reported to be attending there and a Sunday school was organized. Sichar had closed in 1947 with eighty-nine members and Home Mission Committee felt some of them needed a church home. It looked favorable to establish a church there and the committee felt a man should be found as soon as possible to gather the people and make a study of the community. At Greenfield, C. B. Friesen helped on weekends. At Mennoville, students from Bethel College filled the pulpit.⁶³

Church Workers Committee

From minutes of the Church Workers Committee of the Oklahoma Convention and Convention minutes, too, it is obvious that in the 1940s this committee carried a great deal of responsibility and was energetic and creative in its work. In 1943-1944, the members were Lubin W. Jantzen, Meno; Rudolph Schmidt, Ft. Cobb; and H. N. Harder, Geary. Others who served during these crucial years were: Ben Rahn, Henry Hege, Waldo Kaufman, Albert Unruh, John Unruh, and Arnold Epp.

Their work consisted mainly of three parts: the Young People's Retreat (discussed earlier), the Church Leaders' Conference, and youth conferences and rallies.

The Church Leaders' conferences were usually two days long and met in various churches. At first only ministers, their wives, and Sunday school superintendents were invited and seminars were taught by someone from within each group. Then deacons were included and finally it was changed to Church Workers Conference and any church worker was welcome. Special speakers were chosen and these conferences contributed much to Oklahoma churches for many years. Actually, they fulfilled the spiritual need which the first conventions had supplied by allowing time to be given to Bible study.

For the youth conference or rallies, Oklahoma was divided into districts and young people from five or six churches would come together for an evening rally. These were well attended with often over 100 youth taking part in one place.⁶⁴ Relationships were built

62. Ibid., pp. 49-50.

63. Minutes of Home Mission Committee of Western District Conference, June-April 1950.

64. Church Workers Committee, convention, 1943-1947.

between Oklahoma youth at retreats and were strengthened at the rallies.

In all three areas—retreats, church workers conference, and youth rallies—the Church Workers Committee did a large amount of work in planning and speaking in these years.

Divided loyalties

In looking at Convention work in the 1940s, two points stand out: the many accomplishments and the almost constant friction.

In 1942, following commencement at Oklahoma Bible Academy, a group of ministers met to discuss expansion of OBA. In September 1942, Grace Bible Institute opened in Omaha, Nebraska. Prominent in the planning and operation of the Institute were Paul Kuhlman, Meno; and Solomon Mouttet, Inola.⁶⁵

Rivalry quickly sprang up in Oklahoma churches, especially among the ministers. One group seemed to be contrary to having General Conference speakers, and the other group was opposed to speakers from Grace. Organizations like Oklahoma Bible Academy were greatly influenced by this friction and often took sides. Some families wanted to send their youth to a school which would warn them against the dangers of going to Bethel College. Others felt they could not send their youth to a school where they felt prejudice against the General Conference was being taught or caught.

OBA's relationship with Oklahoma churches was damaged by this friction. They no longer enjoyed the total loyalty of the early years, nor was the school now a binding element among all of the Oklahoma churches. Other Convention programs such as retreat suffered too at times as ministers from both sides often had to combat jealousy within themselves toward one another.

Summing up the ten years from 1940 to 1950, there were amazing accomplishments but the question could also be asked, How much more could have been done to build the kingdom of God if so much energy had not been diverted by divided loyalties?

A time for church planting (1951-1960)

The work of the Home Mission Committee and Oklahoma Mennonite churches paid off in 1951 when the First Mennonite Church was organized at Clinton. On November 30, 1958, a new church building which had been built by volunteer labor was dedicated. Henry D. Penner was the minister from 1951 to 1954 and Walter H. Regier was minister from 1954 to 1965. The church soon had a membership of

65. Haury, p. 240.

ninety.⁶⁶

Other new ministers in Oklahoma Convention in 1954 besides Walter Regier were: Edward Wiebe, Ringwood; Homer Sperling, Inola; William Unrau, Deer Creek; and Menno Ediger, Turpin. A ministers' retreat was started by the Church Workers Committee for building fellowship between ministers. Also in 1954, the youth program at convention was changed to Saturday evening, in the hopes that youth would take a more active part in the work of Convention.

Two resolutions passed reveal the attitude of the Convention. The first asked that "Convention prepare programs of instruction on personal soul winning and extension Sunday school work." The second suggested that "those churches absent from convention be encouraged to attend." From 1952 to 1954 Richard Tschetter was Convention chairman.⁶⁷

At the 1955 convention at Hydro, with Arnold Epp as chairman, two resolutions were passed: that we request more General Conference missionaries on furlough be sent to Oklahoma churches, and that each Sunday school send ten cents per member for convention expense.⁶⁸

From April 10 to 24, 1955, a two-week celebration was held in the various Indian stations and churches in Oklahoma. J. J. Esau was the special speaker. Other speakers were Olin Krehbiel, General Conference president; P. A. Wedel and John Thiessen, Board of Missions; Mrs. Rodolphe Petter and Mrs. J. B. Ediger, former missionaries.⁶⁹

In the 1950s, the Zoar church, Goltry, struggled with serious disharmony. It had experienced difficulties from the time of its founding but much success had also been attained. By the 1930s, the congregation had grown to 300 members. In 1936, the first division occurred when their minister was Theodore Epp. In 1955, Victor Graber came to Goltry. The problems of the church multiplied and on September 18, 1957, the Western District Conference finally removed its recognition of Graber's status as a minister and concluded that his personal debts and attitude toward the Conference jeopardized his witness as a minister. All of these events caused the Zoar church to lose members and left the congregation in a state of disarray.

In 1959, Oklahoma ministers held their Ministers' Retreat at Goltry. Under the ministry of the next pastor, Marvin Eck, the Zoar church withdrew from the Western District and General Conference

66. Haury, pp. 233-34.

67. Convention minutes, October 2, 1954.

68. Ibid., September 30, 1955.

69. Herbert W. Dalke, "Seventy-Five Years of Missions in Oklahoma," *Mennonite Life*, (July 1955), pp. 106-107.

despite all the efforts of Conference officials to the contrary. Some members who remained loyal to the Conference left the church. Eck remained the minister of the Zoar church but lost his certification as a General Conference minister.⁷⁰

From 1957 on, the Oklahoma Convention had a representative, Paul Isaak, Hydro, to the United Drys. In 1958, each church was asked to take an offering for this work and send it to the Convention treasurer, Otto Nickel, Bessie. In 1959, W. F. Unruh showed the film "Choices" at convention and the Convention joined the SANE (Sooner Alcoholic and Narcotic Education) organization.

New ministers in Oklahoma in 1958 were: Ben Friesen, Meno; Boyd Bonebrake, Deer Creek; and John K. Warkentin, Bergthal, Corn. In 1959: Herman Walde, Seiling; Jacob Krause, Oklahoma City; and Abe Krause, Inola, were new to Oklahoma. Edward Wiebe, Ringwood, was chairman from 1958 to 1960.

In 1951, Convention held part of its sessions at Oklahoma Bible Academy, with the large meetings held in Enid. In 1952, the Convention voted that OBA should buy a school bus and that its main purpose would be for practical work and visitation of the Oklahoma churches. A resolution was passed in 1953 that the churches heartily cooperate with the work of OBA and each church give an offering for the school once every three months. In 1954, at Meno, the convention adjourned to the hall of the new boys' dormitory for a dedication service and Superintendent Virgil Dirks told the Convention that OBA was not only their mission but their missionaries as well, as he presented the financial needs of the school. So efforts were made to again bring the school to the center of the Convention's concern and support and to some extent succeeded.

OBA had forty-one students in 1957, sixty-two in 1958, and eighty in 1959. However, the main interests of the Convention during these years were drawn to the work of the Church Workers Committee. In 1951, the Church Workers Committee reported to the convention that they wished to add an intermediate retreat to the program. At Herold church in 1952, with Richard Tschetter as chairman, the floor was opened for criticism of the retreat. The stormy session brought forth the jealousies which had built up between Oklahoma ministers. It continued for so long that the speaker, Lando Hiebert, had to cancel his message. In the end, the resolution committee with John Nightingale as chairman recommended that wholehearted support be given to both the retreat and Bible Academy.⁷¹

70. Haury, p. 343.

71. Convention minutes, October 3, 1952.

By 1953, Levi Koehn, chairman of the Church Workers Committee, reported that the Methodist buildings at Camp Hydro would be for sale in 1954 and that they were appraised at a value of \$6000. The first chance to buy had been given to the Mennonites. The Church Workers Committee was told to investigate and report their findings to the Church Workers Conference at Deer Creek in April 1954. Waldo Kaufman and the Hydro church were thanked and commended for their work in preparation, upkeep, and cooking during retreats. At the 1954 convention at Meno, a motion was made by Henry Hege that the Church Workers Committee be authorized to buy the property. The motion passed, but an objection from the floor felt the motion was out of order, since the matter had been presented to the individual churches before the convention for approval. Hege amended his motion to say that the vote to buy be considered a referendum and allow each church to have one vote within a four-week time limit. The motion passed. The churches' votes resulted in the purchase of the grounds.

In 1955, a retreat committee was organized with three ministers from the Church Workers Committee as program committee, and three trustees to take care of the grounds. The committee was made up of Henry Hege, Edward Wiebe, and Walter Regier, and trustees Valentine C. Krehbiel, Hydro; Walter Foth, Cordell; and Henry H. Unruh, Meno. Churches were asked to pay fifty cents per Sunday school member to help pay for the grounds. In 1956, on Sunday afternoon at Eden Mennonite, Inola, a large offering was taken as recommended by the retreat trustees to meet the \$500 note due in October. A further recommendation was for the Sunday schools to raise the additional \$1600 on the basis of fifty cents per member, and that the young people take an active part in raising the money. In 1959, the retreat could report an income of \$2702.83 and by 1960 the grounds were paid for and improvements continued to be made. So the retreat program survived its first critical period and moved ahead.⁷²

In 1955, the Church Workers Committee came to the convention with an important recommendation: that a committee be established by the Oklahoma Convention to investigate the need and organize a branch Sunday school in some Oklahoma area. This Sunday school was to be the work of the Oklahoma Convention and supported by same until such a time that it might be self-supporting and organized into a Mennonite church. The Convention accepted the recommendation with provision that this work be left in the hands of the Church Workers Committee and they report at the Spring Bible

72. Ibid., 1953-1959.

Conference.

In 1956, the motion was made and accepted that the Church Workers Committee establish a mission project in Oklahoma City if feasible, in cooperation with the Western District Home Mission Committee. By 1957, Walter Regier could report a definite need for a mission church in Oklahoma City. Thirty Mennonite families were living there. The Church Workers Committee then came up with a resolution which in summary said all seventeen churches were to unite together and give wholehearted support to the establishment of a Mennonite mission church in Oklahoma City by: having special prayer regularly, each church raising two dollars per member and sending it to Western District Home Mission Committee for Oklahoma City, and each church taking action on this recommendation and reporting to Paul Isaak, secretary of Church Workers Committee. This resolution was accepted forty-eight to four.

In 1958, at Orienta, Henry Hege, reporting on the Oklahoma City Fellowship, said the meetings were being held in the YWCA, but attendance was not good and a morning service should be started. Hege also pointed out that this work was largely up to the Oklahoma churches since the Conference had other concerns in Topeka, Kansas City, and Denver. The Mennonite Brethren had a similar problem and asked to unite with the General Conference Mennonite group.

In March 1959, the Church Workers Committee called Jacob B. Krause, former pastor at Greenfield, Carnegie, to take over leadership of the Oklahoma City Mennonite Fellowship. At convention in Clinton, Krause reported on the work. The beginning had been difficult. A catechism class had been started. The YWCA was not a good location and not conducive to worship.⁷³

The Oklahoma Convention churches were united in their efforts by the end of this period. In 1959, they passed this motion: "Since Oklahoma Convention has no direct connection with Go Ye Mission and our projects are in great need—retreats and the work in Oklahoma City—be it resolved that the report and offering of the Go Ye Mission be omitted from the program of the Oklahoma Convention next year, and the offerings be taken for our projects."⁷⁴

A motion was presented and passed in 1960 that the executive committee set aside a Sunday to be designated as Convention Sunday and that each church take an offering for Convention expense. The theme for the convention was, "Stewardship of Life." The speaker was Milo Kaufman, Hesston, Kansas.⁷⁵

73. *Ibid.*, 1955-1959.

74. *Ibid.*, September 18, 1959.

75. *Ibid.*, September 16, 1960.

Despite its enthusiastic beginning, the Oklahoma City Mennonite Fellowship collapsed in 1960 when the Mennonite Brethren withdrew and formed their own church congregation. There were not enough General Conference Mennonite families to form a nucleus for the work.⁷⁶

Organizing, evaluating, and beginning new work (1961-1970)

When Oklahoma Convention met at Medford in 1961 with Herman Walde as chairman, the need for a constitution was raised. By 1962, a constitution had been accepted by the Convention and the need for bylaws which would give the duties of the committees was felt. These were drawn up and adopted in 1963.

Meat canning for Mennonite Central Committee had become an exciting venture in Oklahoma and the Convention felt representatives were needed from the northern section of the state (Albert Unruh) and from the southern (John A. Entz, Hydro) to report to Convention on MCC work and to serve as contact persons.

In 1963, at Hydro, with Peter Retzlaff, Turpin, as chairman, Norman Bartel, missionary at Hammon, told the convention that the Indian churches were in danger of closing from lack of funding. He asked if Oklahoma Convention would finance work at Canton if the General Conference mission board would place a man there. A year later, the mission board had called a full-time minister (Lyman Sprunger) for Canton.⁷⁷ For the remainder of the decade, Indian work at Canton was an Oklahoma Convention project. In 1970, Arthur Sutton, Indian leader from Canton Mennonite Church, expressed appreciation to the Convention for this support.

Encouraged by the work in which they had been involved, the Convention, in 1968, appointed a project committee for new work. Since then, a committee has been appointed each year and has served by suggesting new possibilities for service. A resolution before convention at the same time in 1986 called on the churches to show they would be behind future projects by supporting fully the present ones: retreats, church workers conference, and the Canton Indian mission work. The resolution passed.

By 1969, at Geary, with Larry Wilson chairman, Perry Beachy, minister at First Mennonite, Geary, and chairman of the new Project Committee, presented two projects for convention approval. Both were accepted and Lyman Sprunger was appointed to begin a project of Book Rack Evangelism in Oklahoma, and John Keller, Medford, was appointed to implement a radio program over Oklahoma sta-

76. Haury, p. 322.

77. Convention minutes, 1961-1963.

tions in cooperation with Faith and Life Program.⁷⁸

A year later, ten book racks had been placed by Oklahoma churches and 2,496 books were sold. The radio programming did not materialize. Convention voted to increase Sunday school dues to one dollar per member to help pay for Book Rack Evangelism and also ask Western District Conference for a subsidy for this work.⁷⁹

The 1960s saw a change in attitude toward women serving on Convention committees. In 1961, a panel discussed "A Christian's Responsibility to the Church." It consisted of four members and a moderator. Two of the members were women: Mrs. Richard Tschetter, Herold; and Mrs. Leonard Abrahams, Clinton. Also the first woman served on the resolutions committee, Wilma McKee, Hydro. Before the 1960s women had served on the program committee and as tellers. In 1965, Wilma McKee, who had been active in retreat work since 1956, was appointed by the executive committee to finish a term on the retreat committee when an elected member resigned. In 1969, the Convention elected their first woman as secretary, Valeta Lee, Hydro, and, in 1970, Donna Froese, Enid, served as the first woman treasurer.

Four Oklahoma congregations built new or remodeled church buildings in the 1960s. Bethel, Hydro, in 1963; Eden, Inola, in 1965; Grace, Enid and Turpin both, in 1966.

Herman and Ruth Buller, members of the Bethel Mennonite Church, Hydro, and their children, Marcia and Royce, were accepted as General Conference missionaries to work under the Congo Inland Mission in 1965. Both Herman and Ruth had served under MCC in Europe during World War II. Herman was previously on a number of Oklahoma Convention committees.⁸⁰

Retreat work centered in Hydro

Retreat work underwent evaluation in 1963 when a committee composed of Norman Bartel, Hammon; Wesley Kroeker, Enid; Abe Krause, Inola; and Mrs. Leonard Abrahams, Clinton, were appointed to determine if the retreat program was moving in the right direction. In 1964, the committee suggested to convention, after looking at all options, that the retreat be continued at the Hydro grounds. They also felt that a retreat committee separate from the Church Workers Committee should be elected.

A resolution was passed in 1965 that the new committee would

78. Convention minutes, 1978; and "Youth Committee Formed in Oklahoma," *The Mennonite*, (Dec. 1978).

79. Convention minutes, 1970.

80. "Bullers go to Congo," *The Mennonite*, (Feb. 1965), p. A-1.

have six members. Three would be program and would consist of two ministers and one interested lay person; three would continue to be trustees. The result of the election, however, was to elect three ministers: Ivan Schultz, Menno Ediger, and Elmer Ensz. By the time the new committee met in February of 1966, Schultz and Ediger had resigned and Palmer Becker, Clinton, and Wilma McKee, Hydro, were appointed as the runner-up nominees to fill the vacancies. The trustees were Walter Foth, Cordell; Valentine C. Krehbiel and Harold Entz, Hydro. By 1967, two one-day adult retreats were started. These retreats elect their own host-directors and plan their retreats with the assistance of a liaison member of the retreat committee.

Senior High Retreat was showing a loss of retreaters with forty-three attending at Camp Hydro in 1966. The retreat committee with Palmer Becker, chairman, decided to spark interest with a change in programming and a move to a state park. With Convention approval, Senior High was held at Roman Nose State Park, Watonga, with Palmer Becker as director. Scholarships were given to the Indian churches. Seventy-three retreaters attended. Creative programming was also started at Camp Hydro for Intermediate Retreaters with Willard Schrag, director. Sixty-five attended.⁸¹

In December 1967, the Western District Retreat Committee met in Hydro with the Oklahoma Retreat Committee. Palmer Becker led the meeting as values and problems were discussed. The result was a proposal that a joint retreat be held if possible, in Oklahoma.⁸² This motion was presented to convention in 1968 and passed, though there were some who expressed doubts about its wisdom. Seventy-eight campers came, equally divided between Kansas and Oklahoma youth. The experiment was considered successful by the youth and retreat leaders, and was continued in 1969 and 1970 at Roman Nose with good attendance.

In 1968, the dorms on the retreat grounds, Hydro, were officially named for those ministers who had been active in purchasing the grounds and beginning retreats: Henry Hege, Albert Unruh, and Waldo Kaufman. Improvements continued on the grounds with new roofs on the dorms in 1968 and on the tabernacle in 1970.⁸³

Ferment in Oklahoma City

As its first major service program in Oklahoma City, the General Conference and Western District made plans in 1965 to open a pre-kindergarten nursery school. O'Ray Graber became a mission

81. Convention minutes, 1966-1967.

82. "Camp Retreat Committee," *The Mennonite*, (Jan. 6, 1968).

83. Convention minutes, 1968-1970.

worker in Oklahoma City and volunteer workers were sought. By August, a large home was purchased and became the Mennonite Church Center. The Don Schierlings and five voluntary service workers were to live there. So, for the second time, work began in Oklahoma City, this time by General Conference and Western District.⁸⁴

In 1967, at convention, O'Ray Graber presented the project, "Negotiations Now" and urged people to sign and in this way help in an effort to end the Vietnam War. In 1968, at Roman Nose and again in 1970, Oklahoma City, Palmer Becker conducted Pre-Draft Boot Camps for Oklahoma youth.⁸⁵ Both of these projects were met with mixed reactions.

The years of the Vietnam War were difficult ones for Oklahoma Mennonites. Many were confused by the conflicting viewpoints around them. This was even more troubling for those who did not really understand the central place of peace and justice in the gospel message.

This background of the times helps us understand the happenings at Intermediate Retreat in 1970. Larry Wilson, director, was using a theme on service. In order to make the theme practical, he took retreaters and staff on a visit to the voluntary service unit and preschool in Oklahoma City. Most retreaters seemed able to learn from the situation but some staff were shocked by lifestyles of some VS workers and were openly hostile. Actually, it became a valuable learning experience when processed back at camp under Wilson's leadership.

Mennoville, Oklahoma's oldest Mennonite church, was the scene of festivities on October 18, 1970, when the nintieth anniversary of the church was remembered by Conference representatives and members of Oklahoma churches.⁸⁶ The church is being preserved as a historical site. The old and the new came together at the 1970 convention when Stanley Smucker explained to the Convention the new church which had been established in Oklahoma City from the merging of the Mennonites with a Presbyterian congregation.

During the years 1961-1970, there was a large turnover of ministers in Oklahoma. Including the three ministers working in Oklahoma City, there were thirty-six ministerial changes in the eighteen churches.

Remembering the past and looking to the future (1971-1980)

Throughout the seventies, Indian mission work received extra atten-

84. "Oklahoma Nursery School," *The Mennonite*, (Feb. 16, 1965), p. 106.

85. "Pre-Draft Boot Camp," *The Mennonite*, (April 2, 1968 and May 5, 1970).

86. Convention minutes, 1970.

tion in Oklahoma Convention. In 1971, Canton, with an attendance of twenty-seven, received \$2019.73 from Oklahoma churches. In this same year, Canton was given the deed for their property by General Conference and both Canton and Koinonia, Clinton, joined the General Conference. In 1972, Oklahoma churches supported Canton with \$1400.70 and Convention gave an extra \$100 for a concrete floor in the new youth building. Voluntary Service workers at a Headstart Program in Hammon were Gary and Janet Schol. After being introduced at convention, they reported on the work in Hammon.⁸⁷

By 1973, donations for Indian work were channeled through the Commission on Home Ministries of the General Conference and went for total Indian work in Oklahoma. Missionaries to the Indian churches reported in 1974 to the convention and a resolution about Indian land was read by Jacob Unrau, Hammon. Scholarships amounting to \$300 were given to Oklahoma Bible Academy for Indian students. Changes in Indian mission churches were reported to Oklahoma Convention at Saron, Orienta, in 1975, by Clifford Koehn, from a report written by Malcolm Wenger. Lyman Sprunger became pastor at New Hopedale, Meno, and Clifford Koehn at First, Geary, as a result of these changes, though Koehn continued to serve on Wednesday nights at Seiling. Wenger was able to be at Oklahoma Convention in 1976 at New Hopedale to report on Indian work.⁸⁸

In 1971, Senior High Retreat was at Boiling Springs, near Woodward, with a Kansas director and a staff from both Kansas and Oklahoma. There were sixty-five retreaters—fourteen from Kansas and forty-nine from Oklahoma. This retreat revealed some differences in expectations. In the past, Kansas staff had had good experiences from flexible rules and large grouping. Oklahoma retreaters felt lost without small groups where they could work out problem areas and were accustomed to a more structured retreat. Some Oklahoma retreaters took advantage of the looser rules and outside interference from a rough element added to the complications. Attempts were made by the staff to work at problems and some progress was made. However, one week was too short a time to accomplish all that needed to be done.

This was brought before the Convention in fall at Bethel, Hydro. A few felt this was a natural result of joining Kansas and Oklahoma retreats together, others recognized some problems, but felt wisdom could be gained from the experience. Retreat did not suffer from a lack of interest or support, but when the Western District Retreat

87. *Ibid.*, 1971-1972.

88. *Ibid.*, 1973-1976.

Committee invited Oklahoma Senior High to a joint retreat at Camp Mennoscah, the convention voted in a close vote not to accept. The two committees agreed to continue to look for ways to build bridges. For two years Senior High went to Sequoyah State Park near Wataonga with Norman Unruh, Enid, as director. A couple of Kansas youth attended. In 1975, Western District Retreat Committee invited Oklahoma again and this time the invitation was accepted and for two years Senior High was a joint effort there. Since then Sequoyah State Park has been used every year except one.

In 1975 an amendment at convention changed the constitution to say the retreat committee shall be composed of six members, three of them trustees, thus removing the stipulation that two of them must be ministers.⁸⁹

New agency for youth work

In 1978, a new statewide youth organization was started under the supervision of the retreat committee. It was named Oklahoma Youth Activities Committee (OKYAC). It consists of a coordinator from the retreat committee, three young adults (appointed), and three youth elected on convention Saturday by the youth. OKYAC coordinates the activities of the youth in Oklahoma, works with youth groups and their sponsors, organizes convention youth day, has a spring meeting called "Okyaction," publishes a newspaper *Okyaction News* every two months, promotes and serves at retreats, and attempts to inform and encourage closer contact with Western District and General Conference youth organizations. The first committee consisted of Wilma McKee, coordinator; Elroy and Valora Unruh, Meno, sponsoring couple; Kenneth Froese, Inola; Lori Unruh, Enid; Arlene Schmidt, Cordell; Elsie Marie Bartel, Hydro; and Mary Ann Pankratz, Inola. OKYAC reports to Oklahoma Convention and receives project money from it.⁹⁰

In 1979 and 1980 the retreat dining hall was completely redone. Part of the funds came from the MCC Canning Committee which uses the dining hall each spring for meat canning free of charge.

During the seventies, Book Rack Evangelism (Choice Books) has grown steadily in Oklahoma. In 1971, there were eleven active racks and 3,022 books were sold. By 1973, 8,543 books were sold and Oklahoma churches contributed \$1010.31 to the work. In 1976, the work merged with Mennonite Conference and Western District, and a year later Walter Regier took over the work and continued with it until 1986. An advisory board for Book Rack Evangelism was also

89. Ibid., 1975.

90. Ibid., 1978.

named. By 1980 Choice Books ministry had expanded into airports with twenty representatives servicing the racks. The Evangelism Committee of the Western District gave \$900 towards the work in Oklahoma.⁹¹

A decision was made in 1971 to attend the Western Oklahoma Sunday School Association instead of having Church Workers Conference. This led to the disbanding of the Church Workers Committee, though it was not officially buried until 1979.

Edwin Nickel, Herold, was sent by the Convention in 1972 to the Congregational Goal Setting Seminar in Chicago. In 1973, Nickel reported that the Evangelism in Depth program had been used by Eden, Inola, and Herold, Cordell.

Brian and Carol Harder, Mountain Lake, Minnesota, moved to Clinton in 1972. As voluntary service workers, they directed the Youth Service Center. The center takes in young people from ages twelve to seventeen who have been in trouble with the law, but should not be confined to jail. Roy Dick, Bethel, Hydro; Betty Hart, Clinton; and Robert Coon, Cordell, are three Oklahoma people who have served for many years with the Youth Service Center. Dick and Coon have been board members and Hart has served in several capacities. At times, the Oklahoma Convention has supported this work.

When the Oklahoma Convention came together at Herold, Cordell, in 1974, they came to celebrate the Convention's seventy-fifth anniversary. The topic was "Living Successfully" and the speaker was Norman J. Schmidt, Quakertown, Pennsylvania, who was the grandson of Jacob Jantzen, Herold. John Arn, president of Oklahoma Convention, had written a book *The Herold Mennonite Church-70th Anniversary, 1899-1969* for the Herold church's seventieth anniversary and now he prepared, with the program committee, a special convention booklet for this celebration. Congratulations were received from General Conference and Bethel College.⁹²

Peace and Social Concerns Committee of the Western District sent Oklahoma Convention \$500 to be used if needed for a ministry to offenders project. A new venture in the same year was Oklahoma All Mennonite Women. Mrs. Ruth Schrag, Geary, was instrumental in beginning this work.⁹³

Turpin Mennonite Church notified Oklahoma Convention in 1975 that it was discontinuing membership in Oklahoma Convention because of its distance from the other congregations in the state.

91. Western District Council of Representatives, January 22, 1980.

92. Convention minutes, 1974; and "Book on Oklahoma Churches-Settlers Move to Canada During First World War," *The Mennonite*, (March 31, 1975).

93. History of First Mennonite Church, Geary.

The first Oklahoma Relief Sale was in November of 1978 at Fairview, Oklahoma. This project has gathered momentum each year and is an inter-Mennonite effort.

Ten years for an integrated ecumenical congregation

On January 3, 1971, a special service celebrated the union of the Mennonite Church Center and the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City. James Defriend was the minister and Stanley Smucker directed the voluntary service program. The Home Mission Committee of the Western District kept in close contact with the Trinity Presbyterian Mennonite Church in Oklahoma City and membership increased from 100 to 250. Norma Wiens of the Home Mission Committee was their contact.

For nearly ten years this integrated and ecumenical congregation continued to support a broad service program. However, internal difficulties over benevolences and the voluntary service unit plagued the congregation.⁹⁴ Wiens and Frank Keller, Conference minister, were there twice in the month of May 1979 and the Home Mission Committee helped in every way possible in working out problems. By August 20, Lael Smith was installed as pastor at Trinity. Many Presbyterian members appreciated the Mennonites and felt good about relating to them. The church was using Mennonite Sunday school materials and the catechism book written by Frank Keller. By November, there was noticeable strain in Mennonite and Presbyterian relationships. Stanley Smucker mentioned the possibility of establishing ties with the Mennonite Brethren Church in Edmond.

In March 1980, Wiens presented a written summary of the conflicts in the Trinity church. There was a question as to whether it centered on black-white or Presbyterian-Mennonite differences. The problem had existed for many years and there seemed little hope of it being resolved. Therefore, the Home Mission Committee recommended to the Western District executive committee that the union be dissolved. Following the advice of the Western District Conference executive committee, Home Mission Committee tried again to resolve the conflict, but when this effort failed, the executive committee agreed to the Home Mission Committee's proposal, stating that since the feeling of disunity and dissatisfaction had grown to this point, ministry had become virtually impossible. While a good number of Trinity members wanted the union to continue, there was a growing determination among others to dissolve it. After agonizing thought, dissolution of the union was recommended. The statement is made "a lesson to be learned from Oklahoma City Presbyterian

94. Haury, p. 323.

experience is, that polity mixtures in dual relationship churches must be studied carefully before future mergers."⁹⁵

In September 1979, the first Leadership Training Conference planned by the Western District Conference Education Committee was held at Grace, Enid. Don Jacobs, director of the Mennonite Christian Leadership Foundation, was the main speaker. The attendance and cooperation of other Western District committees who presented ten workshops made it a valuable experience.⁹⁶

The program committee of the Western District Conference met in Clinton on February 5, 1980, and made plans for the Western District Conference which was to be held in fall in Clinton. The local hosting committee for Oklahoma was Grant Noll, Bethel, Hydro; Betty Hart and Steve Strunk, Clinton; Robert Coon, Herold; and Angie Old Bear, Clinton.⁹⁷

Most Oklahoma churches had two or three changes in ministers from 1971 to 1980. Ministers who began their service in an Oklahoma church during this period were: Deer Creek Mennonite: H. B. Schmidt, Jerald Hiebert, and Arnold Epp; Eden, Inola: Levi Koehn; First, Clinton: Daniel G. Regier and Steve Strunk; First, Geary: Willard Schrag and Clifford Koehn; Grace, Enid: Victor Becker and Wilfred Ulrich; Hammon: Robert Standingwater, Jacob Unrau, and John Chand; Herold, Cordell: Robert Coon; Bethel, Hydro: Larry Wilson, Arnold Epp, and Grant Noll; Medford: H. V. Brannon and Walter Regier; New Hopedale, Meno: Keith Schrag and Lyman Sprunger; Saron, Orienta: Sam Epp; Trinity, Oklahoma City: Stanley Smucker and Lael Smith; Turpin: David Braun and Robert Dalke; West New Hopedale, Ringwood: John Gossen and Melvin Koehn; Seiling: Clifford Koehn and Ric Dalke; Greenfield, Carnegie had been without a pastor since 1969 but the families in the church directed the worship and Clifford Koehn, Geary, supplied on Sunday evenings on alternate weeks.⁹⁸

Learning to serve (1980-1987)

In 1981, with Convention hosted by the Herold Church, Cordell, John Sommer was the speaker on the theme "Learning to Serve." Helen Coon as Western District Resource Person for the Foundation Sunday school material reported in 1981 and 1982.

95. Conference, Home Mission Committee, May 21-22; August 27; November 2-3, 1979.

96. *The Mennonite*, (Sept. 1979), and Conference, Home Mission Committee minutes, June 15, 1979.

97. Conference, Program Committee minutes, February 5, 1980.

98. Elbert Koontz, "Greenfield Families Direct Church Worship," *The Mennonite* (Feb. 4, 1975).

Book Rack Evangelism (Choice Books) sold 12,585 books in 1981 and two years later reported 120 racks and a debt of \$1000. By 1984, about 30,000 books had been sold and the debt was \$4625. The board was increased to six members. In 1986, Walter and Ruby Regier retired from the Choice Books ministry after nine years of service and Earl and Charlotte Schmidt, Cordell, became the new directors. John W. Voth, Convention president, urged at the 1987 convention at Eden, Inola, that extra gifts be given to wipe out the old debt and this was done.⁹⁹

The retreat committee remodeled the retreat dining hall in 1981 and sixty chairs were bought by the churches as an extra project. Seven retreats, three of them adult and four for children and youth, were reported. In this same year, a discussion on what to do about the old barrack-type dorms resulted in three proposals: to build dorms on the same location, to remodel the old dorms, or to sell the west side property and rent other grounds for the retreats. The resulting vote was to build new dorms and so a sheet metal boys' dorm was built in 1982. By 1983, a proposal was accepted to build a girls' dorm as soon as \$10,000 had been received. By 1984, the dorm was completed, with over \$3,000 remaining in the fund. Much of the labor on the dining hall remodeling and the new dorms was done by the trustees of the retreat committee, with LaVern Nickel, Cordell, as supervisor, Bill Entz, Hydro, as treasurer, and Lynn Quiring, member. In 1982, OKYAC, the new statewide youth organization, planted twelve trees on the grounds.

Since 1981 Oklahoma Convention has included in its project list the fellowships at Oklahoma City and Stillwater.

The Convention constitution was amended in 1982 to allow the vice president to become president of Convention after a term as vice president. The Friday evening services were also omitted. An effort was made to condense all business into the Saturday morning service so that the afternoon could be given to speakers. This received mixed reactions, since many committees find this is their only time to inform the Convention about their work.

By 1983, a new congregation was reporting from Tulsa: the Fellowship of the New Creation, with sixty participants. The church had been formed in February of 1983 under the leadership of John Miller, a Mennonite teacher at Oral Roberts University. The planting of a church in Tulsa had been initiated by the Eden church, Inola. Eden served in a mother-daughter relationship, also giving financial support. Western District Home Mission Committee also supported the church in various ways in its first year. By 1984, New Creation

99. Convention minutes, 1981-1987.

applied to Western District Conference for membership. However, within two years the congregation suffered from internal discord over leadership and dissolved in 1986.¹⁰⁰

Oklahoma Bible Academy made an important decision in 1983 when it decided to move to Enid because the majority of its students were coming from there. Land was given in Enid and a new facility was built. The new building was dedicated on September 23, 1984, and Oklahoma Bible Academy celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1986. In 1987, Oklahoma Bible Academy had a total of 123 students. This number included fifty Baptists; twenty-five Mennonites (Mennonite Brethren, fourteen; General Conference, eleven); fifteen Independents; ten Assembly of God; ten Christian; four Lutheran and nine others.¹⁰¹

The land and buildings which the school had owned in Meno were bought by a group of laymen of various denominations for the purpose of beginning a Christian elementary school. It was named Our Land for Christ.

The 1984 Oklahoma Convention included reports on the Mennonite Mutual Aid Wellness program by Robert Coon and the Youth Squad (MDS) by Luella Unruh. President John Voth presented the Oklahoma Convention history writing project for approval. The Convention voted for the three-year project and added \$500 a year to their budget to fund the history. Previously David Haury had conducted a workshop for Oklahoma persons interested in church history and the Western District Historical Committee offered to help fund the Oklahoma history if the Convention decided to go ahead with it. They gave \$500 a year for three years. The executive committee of the Convention appointed to the history committee Wilma McKee, Hydro, chairperson, Lawrence Hart, Clinton, Robert Coon, Turpin, Dean Kroeker, Inola, and Otto Nickel, Cordell.

Eden, Inola, hosted the 1986 convention. The theme was evangelism and David Habegger, Western District Conference church planter, told the convention that the Western District Home Mission Committee was willing to support the Oklahoma Convention in planting a new church. A church planting task force was appointed consisting of Earl Cater, Inola, chairman; Roy Dick, Weatherford; Jerry Schmidt and Chris Atkins, Clinton. One thousand dollars were added to the budget for this project. After researching locations, the task force, together with Western District Home Mission Committee, chose Oklahoma City as a place for planting a church. In August of

100. Telephone conversation between Earl Cater, pastor, Eden Mennonite, Inola, and author on July 30, 1987.

101. Information from John W. Voth, Meno, OBA board member.

1987, Mark and Gayle Wiens and their son John Mark moved to Oklahoma City to start the new work in the south central part of the city in September. Mark and Gayle are members of the Silverwood Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana. Mark graduated from the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries with a Master of Divinity degree in June 1987. The Wienses were commissioned as church planters at Oklahoma Convention at Grace Church, Enid, on September 19, 1987.¹⁰²

Other projects presented by the project committee, with Nancy Koehn, Cordell, as chairperson for the 1986-1987 year were: OKYAC, \$50; retreat scholarships, \$100; Oklahoma Mennonite fellowships, \$100; Oklahoma Bible Academy library, \$250; Choice Books, \$1250; and history project, \$500.

During 1987, all seventeen Oklahoma churches took part in the Call to Kingdom Commitments, the development plan of the General Conference and the Western District. They followed different methods, preferring to adapt the program to their particular church's needs, but were enthusiastic about the Kingdom Goals. At first count, with several churches still to report, Oklahoma Mennonites had given and pledged over \$25,000 with ninety prayer and sixty-one service commitments. Wilma McKee, Hydro, was Oklahoma area coordinator.

Choice Books had a busy year. Many books have had to be pulled from the racks, and a large amount of reorganization has been accomplished. The racks have been repainted and sales have more than doubled.¹⁰³

Service gave birth to fellowship

The goal of the Local Conference at its beginning in 1899 was to develop closer ties between the scattered congregations. The Convention has reached this goal, although the methods agreed upon eighty-eight years ago may no longer seem the best way to achieve it. The first point suggested that the Local Conference should be exclusively upbuilding and have no business or occupational function.¹⁰⁴

However, the years have proven that it was service areas which drew the churches together in a common purpose. The beginning and continued support of a school, the Church Workers Committee with its schedule of Bible conferences, retreats and rallies, the church planting efforts, OKYAC, and Choice Book evangelism are examples

102. *The Mennonite*, (July 14, 1987), p. A-2.

103. Telephone report from Charlotte Schmidt, Cordell, Choice Book director with husband Earl Schmidt, on July 18, 1987.

104. Minutes of the Local Conference of Mennonites in Oklahoma, 1899.

of the best efforts of the Oklahoma Convention. There is great diversity among the seventeen Oklahoma congregations, but there is also a basic faith in one Lord and a determination to serve in ways which honor God.

9. An Anabaptist faith for Oklahoma

John W. Voth

A beekeeper would say that a hive of honey bees forms a good vision for the Oklahoma Convention. Being a honey bee isn't easy. But it seems (to the beekeeper, at least) that bee society has advantages over the group life of most other insects. Being a bee is worth the effort.

Now the lazy and super-independent might prefer to be common flies. (You fly biologists, please excuse my illustration.) A housefly surely seems to be free to do as it pleases. It can fly to whichever garbage can it wants when it wants. No one tells it what to do. It seems to have ultimate freedom. Now that sounds great until someone starts chasing the fly with a flyswatter. Who helps the super-independent fly out when it gets into trouble?

No one does, and that is where it pays to be a honey bee. The bee has to cooperate with the group from the time it is first born. Who knows whether it has to or whether it wants to? But one thing is certain. When the enemy attacks or the cold winter wind blows, the bee is mighty thankful that it is a part of a group that cares.

How will the Oklahoma Convention look five or ten years from now if we learn from the cooperation of bees? The Oklahoma Convention will be a healthy and growing organization in the future because we will be: 1) focusing on the health of individual churches working together; 2) developing a common vision of what Christ is calling us to do; 3) desiring to put more effort into our churches and the Convention; 4) doing more than just talking about evangelism. We will be eagerly learning ways that can reproduce our kind of disciples.



The undertaking of hosting the General Conference in the New Hopedale Church in 1914 built unity within the congregation.

Focusing on the health of individual churches

Which will be more important, the individual churches or the Convention? It will be both. The attention earlier parts of this book give to the history and personality of individual churches is exciting. Without individual churches there is no Oklahoma Convention, no Western District Conference, nor General Conference. As we plan for future growing churches, we will ask some serious questions about our Mennonite structures. Are they organized toward aiding committees and projects, but neglecting the life of individual churches? The only organization Christ started was the church. Churches are the lifeline of all Mennonite interrelations. We will put their health and vitality foremost. When youth leave our camps and work projects, the only way to keep in touch with them is through churches. When our projects need money, we appeal to churches. When our people move to the cities, they are attracted to other churches because we don't have one in their city. We take their existence and health far too much for granted. The local church will need to be our focus.

Individual churches are guilty of existing to support Mennonite Central Committee or missions away off somewhere without having any plan for their own continued existence. Yes, in this vision for the future we will still reach out to others both spiritually and physically. Half of a church budget ought to be mission, and that is one of

our greatest strengths. But in the future we will put much more energy, thought, and planning into our future as individual churches. The money churches give to missions is being used by people who have thought out plans and strategies; that is great. Who is doing any planning for your local church? When it's gone, who is going to support the missions?

Becoming a healthy hive of bees will involve a big change in the poor self-image our churches have allowed to develop. We are proud of our churches in what they have done for us and our families. But somehow we don't feel that we have something the unchurched of our communities need. Why is that? Do we feel that we are too good for them? That is exactly what some of our neighbors have concluded. But that's not the real reason. Somehow we feel we are different.

David Haury's story of where we have come from helps us to see why we feel as we do. We had to leave Kansas because we were not as successful as others. We came to a hostile environment in Oklahoma that saw us as unpatriotic, simpleminded Dutchmen. The result is that we have developed an isolated and independent spirit that has its strengths and weaknesses. It has surely helped us cope with economic hardships and other crises. But now that we are not replacing ourselves with natural births, and our children have gone off to the cities where we don't feel our churches would fit, we are slowly and sometimes not so slowly dying on the vine.

When Carol Suter, development director for the General Conference, brought the Oklahoma churches together to talk about our dreams and concerns, our generally poor self-image raised its ugly head. We sounded like terminal patients. I'll never forget Carol expressing with emotion, "I just can't conceive of the church of Jesus Christ talking about dying." One minister who had just shared the seeming hopelessness of their aging congregation finally was brave enough to admit, "The Baptists came to town and took a survey, and they say one half of our community is unchurched."

Our doctrine tells us that the good news of Jesus Christ can help all people become new persons and experience the joys of the family of God in the church. In the future, we are going to develop confidence that our church is handpicked by God to minister to our community.

Developing a common vision of what Christ is calling us to be

One of the ways we will overcome the feeling of not fitting in is to form a common vision of who we are and what we have to offer. Rather than trying to form a positive image for our church by running away from "being Mennonite," we will see that we do have much to offer to the larger church and the world.

What do we say to, “You go to a Mennonite church? What kind of a church is that?” Nothing less than a clear enthusiastic answer from us will do. Oklahoma Mennonites have something to offer. But one of our problems has been a struggle over just what we believe. The struggles which brought our parents to Oklahoma made it natural for faith to develop along independent lines. Often the tension was between being “Conference-minded” and “not Conference-minded.” We found it hard to really listen to the concern of others. Growing up and ministering right in the middle of this struggle and being pulled very much by both sides has been my experience.

What do the Conference-minded feel? They feel good about being Mennonite, believing the larger Mennonite body is basically faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their concern is that we need the guidance of the larger Mennonite body to keep our identity and preserve and promote those things which are unique to Anabaptist theology.

The Conference-minded would argue that those who say, “We don’t want ‘Mennonite-ism,’ we just want to follow the Bible,” are in reality following another theology whether they admit it or not. We all interpret the Bible through a certain set of colored glasses. They feel those who leave the Mennonite church usually end up throwing out the good as well as what they consider the bad of Mennonite ways. They have decided it is better to tolerate the differences among Mennonites and work toward understanding than to split the group. Their experience is that arguing about scriptural interpretation often gets one nowhere; therefore, it is more important to live like Christ. They sense that those who oppose the Conference often have trouble getting along with people in general, looking to right beliefs to solve problems but doing a poor job of consistently living the kind of ethical life Christ lived. The Conference-minded sometimes feel that those who are against the Conference seem to lack dependability and faithfulness in carrying out tasks the group decided upon.

What are the feelings of those who are not Conference-minded? They generally do not feel good about the identity of the Mennonite body as a whole. Still, it is often true that they want to keep something of their former identity, such as forming an independent church with a Mennonite name. In discussions with some, it has been asked, “Why don’t we either get in or get out.” They usually spell out something that indicates deep ties.

Their pain is that they feel the larger church has changed its beliefs in fundamental ways. They feel that some leaders have left the basic teaching of Scripture through the influence of modern methods of interpreting Scripture. To them a common view of an authoritative Scripture is the only way for a church to have unity.

They agree that we all do tend to interpret Scripture through a certain set of colored glasses but maintain that we are not working hard enough at taking off the glasses. They feel that Scripture is not being allowed to speak for itself as the final authority. Those finding themselves opposing the Conference believe the openness of Mennonite-ism to reinterpret Scripture has brought harm to the body. They feel these changes are incompatible with the teachings of Menno Simons and are just as destructive to the body as outside conservative influences.

The paradox in all of this is that sometimes the person whose theology of the Scriptures appears weak in practice exhibits more submission to the Scriptures than others. Conversely, some who seem to splinter the church are really acting out of a deep heart of care and in the end exhibit more loyalty to the group than do others. In our vision, we will realize how desperately we need to be open and honest and vulnerable to each other. Also, we will ask serious questions about what are the strands that bind us together.

Sharing the Anabaptist vision

What is there about Mennonite churches that this world needs to have? Are we just another church like all the rest? Are we so different that we don't have anything to offer the world today? Or do Mennonite churches differ so much from church to church that we can't speak of anything that's uniquely Mennonite?

The early Mennonites were called Anabaptists. Let's have a little history lesson about why Menno and others started a different group in the first place. A survey of various views about the early Anabaptists reads as follows:

At other times and to other people, Anabaptism has been an antique social curiosity, the first true fundamentalist movement. To others it was a Christian movement—tough, resilient, and genuine because it was tied to the land and expressed in hard work and simple frugality. Still others have regarded it as the only consistent Protestantism which overcame the perversions of the church of Rome and brought Protestantism to the goal which Martin Luther, Huldreich Zwingli, and John Calvin did not reach.¹

In 1943, Harold S. Bender delivered a classical essay to the American Society of Church History entitled "The Anabaptist Vision." He described the movement as "a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament

1. Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1973), p. 1.

Church, the vision of Christ and the Apostles.”² He said further that they had a conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship. Faith for them was nothing without following.

“The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness, and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective experience.”³ Bender was saying that the unique dimension of Anabaptism was its emphasis on the change that faith in Christ produces.

Probably all agree that the new birth ought to be a real experience. But evangelical Protestants tend to be heavy on believing the right thing, rather than taking the step of faith the Anabaptists emphasized. The Anabaptists’ stress on a changed life brings together beautifully the words of both Jesus and Paul when they were asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17) and “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). Jesus said, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). On the other hand, Paul replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31). Does Jesus teach a salvation by works, and Paul one by faith? No, these passages don’t require hours of reconciliation if one starts with an emphasis that becoming a Christian is a real change in life.

Menno Simons agreed with Martin Luther that justification is by faith but he was not satisfied with the lack of change in many who were claiming faith in Christ. So he wrote, “Show us one single word in the whole Bible (for we do not regard human fables and lies) saying that an unbelieving, refractory, carnal man without regeneration and true repentance was or can be saved simply because he boasts of faith and the death of Christ.”⁴

So when people ask, “Who are the Mennonites?” we can answer with confidence, “We emphasize 2 Corinthians 5:17, ‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come!’ ” For us this change is much greater than just belonging to some church or using the name Jesus. It means we become like Christ in sacrificing to become a servant to those who are hurting in this world, even when their situation seems hopeless. So we emphasize relief and helping the poor.

We believe that as Christ loved us we ought to care about each

2. Guy Herschberger, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1957), Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” p. 37.

3. Bender, p. 43.

4. J. C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), p. 95.

other in the church. That means when people join our church they are joining a family that believes in tough love. Mennonite churches may be hard to enter, but they are harder to exit. We will stick with people through thick and thin and from generation to generation. Sometimes we think people don't want that kind of commitment today, but really they do. They are looking for a church that cares deeply over the long haul. In this age of church hoppers and church splits, we can offer stability. That in itself ought to make us aggressive in strengthening and multiplying our churches.

Since we believe that the gospel changes lives, we will not be satisfied with the present statistics which show that the church is not making a difference in people's lives. We will find a way to develop disciples that produce strong families, faithful marriages, and beautiful people whose lives are not ruined by the excesses of our affluent society.

We believe that Christ forgave those who crucified him. Therefore, we need to work much harder in this world of war and violence to demonstrate another way. Overcoming evil with good as Paul taught in Romans 12 is more than just an ideal; it is our responsibility. We can show how our forefathers raised the value of life in European society because they were ready to give their lives rather than take another.

God wants us to emphasize these values we hold dear. As we vigorously proclaim them we can be salt both to the rest of Christ's body, the church, and the world. Enthusiasm for these values we have in common will cause us to develop ways to work together in promoting them. But what about the effort it will take to promote these beliefs? Do we have the energy?

Put more effort into our churches and the Convention

As we continue to look into the future, strong, growing Mennonite churches in Oklahoma will be the result of deliberate effort. This history of the Oklahoma Convention reveals some of the effort that went into establishing our churches in the first place. The story says that the work of establishing churches in the Convention was taken seriously. There is also some indication that the efforts were not as united as the original migration from Russia. Whatever may be true of the past, our future rests with the efforts produced by this generation. If the Oklahoma churches survive, grow to be strong and healthy, plus reproduce more of their kind, it will be the result of our effort.

If our churches become extinct, the reason will not be that our kind of church was outdated. Neither will it happen because of the exodus

of people from rural communities. We will not be able to say our demise came because we did not have the leaders or the gifts. Rather, if we do become extinct, it will happen because we had other priorities and failed to put forth the effort that the growth of healthy churches requires.

It took long hours of hard labor to make the Oklahoma prairie productive. History seems to say that even at that point the development of our churches was a second priority. But at least it was high on our list and the spiritual and social aspect of our lives focused on the church. But farming hasn't always paid well; so when outside jobs became available, we farmed and worked out. The time we used to study our Sunday school lesson got squeezed out first. As society in Oklahoma developed around us, there came many more demands on our time, and we took the existence of our churches for granted. Add to this the competition for our time and effort para-church organizations added and one gets the real reasons why our churches have declined.

We live with a myth that churches don't take that much effort or time. Surely two hours a week of attendance would be the maximum that the Lord would expect. And if one finds thirty minutes to glance at the Sunday school lesson to be taught Sunday that would be more than last week. The band teacher said the kids have to be at school Saturday morning, and the youth directors will surely understand why they missed the youth outing. There seems to be no other time to schedule family reunions than Sunday morning. We cannot afford a full-time pastor. Who ever heard of a church secretary? Then this myth goes on to tell us that somehow the church will always be there. But the reality is that our members end up going to other churches. If the difference between those churches and ours were analyzed, the answer would be effort and dedication.

So in this vision we see Oklahoma churches recognizing the great satisfaction and well-being that comes from making the church a top priority in life. Lots of time, effort, money, and creativity placed in churches pays big dividends both to families and to individuals. We can believe this with all our heart because the Bible teaches that Christ's efforts went to the establishment of the church.

More than talk about evangelism: reproducing our kind of disciples

There are two negative ways that we handle evangelism. We explain it away as either, "Everything we do is evangelism," or we create lots of guilt about something that we never do anything about.

But for some Mennonite churches, evangelism has come alive. One of these is the Eden Mennonite Church, Inola. A case study of what is happening at Inola is the best way for us to get a vision for evange-

lism. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Eden was a typical rural congregation with declining membership. Young people grew up there, went off to college, got jobs in the cities, and the congregation struggled. But what happened to change this cycle of defeat? One must be careful not to put this congregation on a pedestal and say that others ought to be just like it. Also, we must realize that ultimately the future of our churches is in God's hands. God may see fit to give us the testing of Job at any time. But from the standpoint of human responsibility there is much that we can do and what is happening at Inola can be an encouragement to all of us.

Interviews with various leaders at Eden produced the following list of the significant factors that contributed to their health and growth.

1. This church was blessed with stable pastoral leadership over many years that made the Christian faith a real part of everyday life. Faithfulness to the Bible and the church was consistently taught and lived in humility.

2. The result was a stable church that took ministry to its people seriously while other churches in the community were developing flashy ministries that only lasted a short while and then split. Over the years the church developed a music ministry, a Sunday school, and a community daily vacation Bible school program that are unmatched in the community.

3. A core of young and middle-aged adults developed who were able to find jobs in the developing community. These were people who had good feelings about their church and were committed to its ministry. Whether male or female, they brought their spouses over to the Mennonite church. Reasons given for this are family loyalty, strong sense of community, and the history of stability. Did these young adults win the respect of older members to become leaders, or did older members initiate the change to new leadership? It seemed to work both ways.

4. The result was a wide variety of friendly people from various theological backgrounds who agreed on what they felt was important and didn't judge each other on the rest. In times of bitter disagreements which did exist, the people seemed to sense their need to accept the decisions of their leaders.

5. Even though the church was unaware of it, crises became stepping-stones. One example of this is the extended illness of one pastor and his wife. Most congregations would have decided that because of the length of this crisis, there would need to be a replacement. But the congregation seemed to say, "He and his wife ministered to our sick, come what may, so now it is our turn to minister." And minister they did with volunteers coming to provide health care at the parsonage daily. At the same time, the church began ministering to other

families that were going through terminal illnesses. This crisis turned the idea of lay ministry from theory into practice.

6. The present pastoral leadership possesses gifts relating to working with new people, leading people in Bible study and prayer, and being optimistic about the church and church growth. Pastor Earl Cater's own testimony is a good conclusion for our vision. "I cannot help being positive about the church of Jesus Christ. Even a relatively poor one has the greatest gift and the most powerful resource ever made available to humankind. My life was one of shameful degradation and hopeless darkness before a ragtag country church pointed out the way. I am who I am because the power of the gospel of Jesus made me new. I want the world to know the same love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control which is mine through Jesus."

To inspire each other by working together

Honeybees forget about their own ease and self-interest as they get caught up in the vision of the strong healthy hive they can become. They trust and depend on each other. They inspire each other as they work together and communicate in ways that the scientists still do not understand. Our vision for Oklahoma Mennonite churches is that we will focus on the potential of our individual churches working together, we will develop a common vision of what Mennonite churches have to offer, we will have a passion for the effort our churches need, and we will learn effective ways of reproducing faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Appendix 1

Meetings / Oklahoma Convention of General Conference Mennonites

| <i>Date</i> | <i>President</i> | <i>Location of convention</i> |
|--------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1899 | Christian Krehbiel, Halstead | Mission House, Shelly |
| 1900 | J. J. Kliewer, Corn | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1901 | J. S. Krehbiel, Geary | Mennoville, El Reno |
| 1902 | H. J. Gaede, Medford | Friedensau, Perry |
| 1903 | John Lichti, Zion, Lucien | First, Geary |
| 1904 | H. J. Gaede, Medford | Bergthal, Corn |
| 1905 | J. S. Krehbiel, Geary | Deer Creek |
| 1906 | J. S. Krehbiel, Geary | Ebenezer and Friedensthal, Gotebo |
| 1907 | P. R. Voth, Gotebo | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1908 | J. F. Moyer, Deer Creek | Saron, Orienta |
| 1909 | J. F. Moyer, Deer Creek | First, Geary |
| 1910 | J. S. Krehbiel, Geary | Medford |
| 1911 | No convention, Western District at Bergthal, Corn | |
| 1912 | J. S. Krehbiel, Geary | Saron, Orienta |
| 1913 | John Lichti, Deer Creek | West New Hopedale, Ringwood |
| 1914 | No convention, General Conference at Meno | |
| 1915 | J. J. Ratzlaff, Meno | Bergthal, Corn |
| 1917 | J. J. Ratzlaff, Meno | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1918 | P. R. Voth, Gotebo | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1919 | P. R. Voth, Gotebo | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1920 | John Lichti, Deer Creek | Herold, Cordell |
| 1922 | H. R. Voth, Goltry | Saron, Orienta |
| 1923 | H. R. Voth, Gotebo | Medford |
| 1924 | J. J. Ratzlaff, Meno | Zoar, Goltry |
| 1925—1935 (Records lost) | | |
| 1936 | John Lichti, Medford | Saron, Orienta |
| 1937 | John Lichti, Medford | Eden, Inola |
| 1938 | Solomon Mouttet, Inola | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1939 | Solomon Mouttet, Inola | Saron, Orienta |
| 1940 | Solomon Mouttet, Inola | First, Clinton |
| 1941 | Henry Hege, Corn | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1942 | Henry Hege, Corn | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1943 | Henry Hege, Corn | Zoar, Goltry |

| | | |
|------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1944 | H. P. Fast, Orienta | Herold, Cordell |
| 1945 | H. P. Fast, Orienta | Medford |
| 1946 | H. P. Fast, Orienta | Saron, Fairview |
| 1947 | J. W. Bergen, Goltry | Bergthal, Corn |
| 1948 | J. W. Bergen, Goltry | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1949 | Albert Unruh, Enid | Bethel, Hydro |
| 1950 | Albert Unruh, Enid | Go Ye Mission Campgrounds |
| 1951 | Albert Unruh, Enid | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1952 | Richard Tschetter, Cordell | Herold, Cordell |
| 1953 | Richard Tschetter, Cordell | Saron, Orienta |
| 1954 | Richard Tschetter, Cordell | Grace, Enid |
| 1955 | Arnold Epp, Meno | Bethel, Hydro |
| 1956 | Homer Sperling, Inola | Eden, Inola |
| 1957 | William Unrau, Deer Creek | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1958 | Edward Wiebe, Ringwood | Saron, Orienta |
| 1959 | Edward Wiebe, Ringwood | First, Clinton |
| 1960 | Edward Wiebe, Ringwood | Grace, Enid |
| 1961 | Herman Walde, Seiling | Medford |
| 1962 | Herman Walde, Seiling | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1963 | Peter Retzlaff, Turpin | Bethel, Hydro |
| 1964 | Jacob Krause, Medford | Herold, Cordell |
| 1965 | Ben Friesen, Meno | Saron, Orienta |
| 1966 | Frank Huebert, Orienta | Grace, Enid |
| 1967 | Frank Huebert, Orienta | First, Clinton |
| 1968 | Frank Huebert, Orienta | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1969 | Larry Wilson, Enid | First, Geary |
| 1970 | Larry Wilson, Enid | Herold, Cordell |
| 1971 | Ivan Schultz, Ringwood | Bethel, Hydro |
| 1972 | John Arn, Cordell | Grace, Enid |
| 1973 | John Arn, Cordell | Eden, Inola |
| 1974 | John Arn, Cordell | Herold, Cordell |
| 1975 | John Arn, Cordell | Saron, Orienta |
| 1976 | Levi Koehn, Inola | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1977 | Levi Koehn, Inola | First, Clinton |
| 1978 | Levi Koehn, Inola | Bethel, Hydro |
| 1979 | Wilfred Ulrich, Enid | Eden, Inola |
| 1980 | Wilfred Ulrich, Enid | Grace, Enid |
| 1981 | Don Crisp, Orienta | Herold, Cordell |
| 1982 | Don Crisp, Orienta | Saron, Orienta |
| 1983 | John Voth, Meno | New Hopedale, Meno |
| 1984 | John Voth, Meno | First, Clinton |
| 1985 | John Voth, Meno | Bethel, Hydro |
| 1986 | John Voth, Meno | Eden, Inola |
| 1987 | Arnold Curby, Orienta | Grace, Enid |

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Growing faith:

General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma



David A. Haury: Families suffered, communities were torn apart, leadership failed, and values were challenged. Yet many young Mennonites from central Kansas preserved their faith and passed it on to new generations.

S. S. Haury in 1879: Next spring, perhaps in April, God willing, I shall again return to the Indians, there to settle among the Arapahos. First . . . erect a small building . . . then endeavor by the Lord's aid to learn the language.

Wilma McKee: The value of land, the strong beliefs of preserving the Mennonite faith, and of giving aid to those in need were primary for early Oklahoma Mennonites.

Dean Kroeker: The many occasions of togetherness made it possible to live through the times of drought and deprivation. In the holiday celebrations, the daily *faspas*, and the shared grief at funerals, there was and continues to be among Oklahoma Mennonites a very real bond which represents true communion.

Robert Coon: When Albert C. Voth returned home after his release, some of the respected leaders in the denomination could not understand why he and others had taken an absolute stand against anything military. His reply was, "It's in the system . . . I could not escape this feeling that you are either in or out."

John W. Voth: Our vision for Oklahoma Mennonite churches is that we will focus on the potential of our individual churches working together, we will develop a common vision of what Mennonite churches have to offer, we will have a passion for the effort our churches need, and we will learn effective ways of reproducing faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.